The Woods Are Lovely

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The Woods Are Lovely

by AtticusCrete

Summary

It should have been a simple team building exercise. Just seven guys with someone who knew the ropes, who wouldn't get them lost or eaten by a bear.

But as the saying goes, if they wanted a quiet time, they shoulda gone to Vegas.

A Hannibal/Will A/B/O Survivalism AU set in the Virginia Woods. With murder.

Notes

For my dear friend Colleen.

The tenth story for those who backed the Radiance Kickstarter 'Delight' Level. Thank you!!

Each backer bid for a minimum of 1000 words of fic. This one has rather more.

The Woods Are Lovely

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

Robert Frost
Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

He pushes on to the top of the hill and takes another deep and groaning breath. The last fifty yards are always the worst. Beside him Wendigo is panting, the terrain steep, even for her. Underfoot the earth is a little slippery from the recent rain, but he's uncaring. Not far now. Not far.

At the small summit Will catches his breath and looks out over the escarpment. He lets his breathing adjust, puts his walking poles down on the ground beside him and lowers himself onto the trunk of a fallen tree. He notices the tightness in his calf muscles, the ache deep in his side where he'd ignored the stitch on his too fast ascent, even Wen seems unsettled by what had been almost a run up the side of Blood Mountain. His breathing evens out, and he tries not to gulp for air, tries to get past the burn in the area of his heart.

Fucking Hannibal Lecter. Bastard.

.....

It takes maybe twenty minutes for him to calm down properly, by then his actions are almost by rote; find a water bottle in a side pocket and the packaway dish, make sure Wendigo drinks it all. Drink half a pint himself, and then drink some more. Eat the energy bar from the waist pocket on his pack. His favourite kind, the comforting nutty one with just enough fruit for it not to dry to the roof of his mouth. He wonders how pathetic it would make him if he cried. The hand he pushes through Wendigo's fur is a comfort though. She flops down beside him and he begins to feel a little better, a little more together. A little as though the world hasn't quite ended. Deep breaths he tells himself. Deep breaths and listen. Smell. Look.

From his perch he can see down into the long valley below. Everything is that delicious spring time liminal green. Different shades, potent, waiting, hopeful. Everything speaks of possibility. He tries not to think of the last twenty four hours, of all his hopes and possibilities and maybes. Wen makes a small noise and he rubs harder behind her ears and then pushes his face down into the nape of her neck and breathes in the scent of dog and wolf and wildness almost tamed. Maybe that's how he smells. Even a non secretor like him. He'd watched as Hannibal's nose had flared. So. Something. He smelled of something. And, just. Fuck.

All right then. All right. It could be worse. He could have done something much much worse. Something from which there was no coming back. But he didn't, so it's ok. And for sure it's going to be awkward but it's ok. He can get past it. They both can. Right? Right. They have to.

He tries to empty his mind, focus on the way the woods are speaking. They have their own language, only some of it audible. Some of it must be seen, inhabited, understood. Right now there's a bear maybe half a mile away, still lumbering and sore after a long winter, still waking, everything scattering before her slow advance. There's an unkindness of ravens somewhere deep below him in the valley, one of them is yelling for attention, some kind of delicious decay he or she wants his fellows to know about. There's another predator

somewhere behind and below him, near the path he came up. Maybe the kind with two legs given the way silence ripples out from them, everything holding its breath until it passes. Probably oblivious to the stress of its passage. Just maybe someone he knows. The woods are not as empty as they seem.

He pulls a notebook and pencil from the top pocket of his shirt. Just a reminder about the bear. If it's the one he thinks it is she'll shake her way down one of the game trails, and settle near the Hobbs' old abandoned cabin where there's better pickings than up here. She has a territory that winds its way round there. He had a lovely and very lively five minutes when he'd found her inside the cabin one time. Both of them looking for a place to shelter out of a sudden cloud burst. She'd won that one. It hadn't even been a competition in Will's mind. Bears always win. Unless it's a very angry, lean and hungry wolf pack. But even then. Usually, he'd put his money on the bear.

They only look cute and cuddly.

He eases himself off the tree trunk and onto the ground and then opens up his rucksack. All he'd done when he arrived home was grab his bug out bag, trusting in his own preparedness. He checks it now. If it comes up short there's still plenty of time to get back to his home, or deal with his own deficiencies. But as he takes out each item he is both relieved and somehow a little annoyed with himself. How is it he can manage the crucial items for a few nights outdoors in his own backyard and he can't deal with the attentions of a fucking Alpha. Yeah. Yeah. He knows why. Thanks.

He double checks against his mental list of essentials, and then repacks everything. Ok. Good to go. He's about to pull himself to his feet when he hears voices. Two male, and another one, higher pitched and female. Probably Garrett and Abigail and some guy they're showing round. He takes a few more breaths. Not quite what he wanted, but maybe a good enough distraction for now. He turns towards the path, a small smile ready, just in case it is his acquaintances. Is that the right term? He supposes he's friendly enough with them. Abigail for sure. And Garrett? Well, he's ok. An unassuming Beta. Kind of intense. But ok. Wen sits up and wags her tail. Also ready.

"Will! Hey. Dad. It's Will!"

Abigail rushes forwards towards him but as usual it's Wendigo she hugs. Wen goes all wriggly and ecstatic. She is a big fan of Abigail. A real big fan. They spend a little time in mutual adoration. It gives the adults something to smile about so they can get past the introductions. Will just about takes in the fact that the guy, Donald, something, is another doctor. God. Aren't there just too many of them around right now? But they quickly settle into the whole kit list thing. A kind of preening and mutual respect and status bump activity.

In Will's head there are three kinds of hikers and campers he meets, the ones who've got their kit list down and have either the ultralight or the whole damn Victorian canvas thing going on; the ones who went to Walmart where everything was on sale and who are looking to die a cold damp death on some remote summit because damn they brought a compass but it's still in its packaging; and lastly, the ones who've got all the gear and no idea. None. So, they'll die fast too, but wearing cuben fibre rainwear and spandex gaiters.

He glances at Donald's feet. Nope. Just decent, well worn leather boots. That's not so bad then. Donald's interested in the tree cover. The chestnut blight. How the hickory stands are doing. What's up with the hemlock. He knows enough to be interesting and interested, but not so much that he comes across as a shit. Maybe Garrett smirks a little now and again, and Will side eyes him. He thinks Garrett, or maybe his wife has some kind of idea of setting him up, finding him a mate, at the very least encouraging him to get out there, live a little. Date. Like hell. But this guy's ok. And mated and bonded if the double ringed irises are reliable as an indicator. Which they are. Maybe 88% of the time. Alpha too. But that's not so surprising if he is a doctor. Bit like the raven paradox, or near enough, not all alphas are doctors, but most doctors are alphas. Faintly he wonders if Donald knows Jack Crawford, or Hannibal. Or any of them. He can't quite decide right now if he wants to know.

Maybe later.

For all that Garrett can be a bit much sometimes Donald seems to have the long practised discursive ease of a regular medical consultant and conversationalist. He can pull his own weight in the to and fro. It makes Will smile a little. And really he's a nice guy. More so Will can't help but perk up when he finds out that Donald is a flyfisherman, sure, he says he's an amateur and un skilled, but as the conversation turns to tippets and ties it's easy. God. It's easy. And that's a relief. Seems like he hasn't totally lost the plot. Seems like he can swallow around the regret, make some sense. Even if Garret still gives him some odd looks just now and again.

Eventually they've stood and talked for so long that the next step is either to go their own ways or to sit, build a fire, share a hot drink or even something to eat. When Donald sits and joins Abigail in an appreciation of Wendigo the decision is made for all of them. And Will is surprised at how ok he is with that. He sighs. Alpha pheromones probably. Either residual from the time spent with Hannibal or just some low key activity on Donald's part. He doesn't feel like it's predatory or been overly protective, but he shifts as he realises he's probably over responding. It shows how disordered he is still. Just from those few hours. He gives himself a little mental shake.

Garret has a two pint Kelly kettle which he gets going. He uses just a little dried punk and kindling and a bit of crumbled esbit cube. Just enough. To help with any residual damp. When it is lit, the bright flame is mesmerising, even if it is mostly contained. Donald sighs his contentment round his ti mug, though the coffee is instant and is sprinkled with some powdered milk substitute abomination. He must have heightened taste buds like all alphas but he's not being a jerk about it. Will can only hope that the ER team will be the same. Or they can carry their own damn french press, solar grinder and beans. He smiles again at the thought of how that conversation might go. Jack Crawford looks like a hot vanilla roast kind of guy.

The next hour of cheerful conversation and exchange mostly washes over Will, and he hopes he's helping Garrett earn his fee. It's kind of calming. And yeah, it still might be the pheromones, but it's nice, and normal, and he'll take it. He could do with normal, after way too much excitement.

When they finish their drinks Abigail sets to washing out the mugs and Will takes Donald to the nearest water source to refill. The seep is slow through the rocks but enough to fill a few bottles if you don't mind the wait. Will's pleased to see that Donald has brought his own squeeze filter. So the guy's prepared. It's good. Nice. He seems like a decent person all round.

"You work for a clinic?"

Donald smiles. "No freebies!" He laughs then. "No. I'm just kidding. You're all right. I work at Johns Hopkins. Consultant. Part time now."

He pauses for a moment and then seems to make some kind of choice.

"I'm in neurology. And it's a bit of a thing but I had a bad go with encephalitis a few years back. Didn't spot it. I was lucky though. One of my friends smelled it on me. Said I had a kind of fevered sweetness. I said it was just the crap aftershave but he was persistent. And well. I was a bit ill. So I've cut my hours back. HR was decent about it. And it's good really. Gives me time to get out. Do the important things. You know?"

Will nods. He knows. Donald smiles at him.

"Garret says you take folks out? Fly fishing? Survival groups, challenges? That kind of thing. I'd be interested in hiring you. Maybe for a long weekend. I'd be interested to see if I could manage the Five C Thing."

Will nods. Five C-ers are usually bachelor parties avoiding the Vegas scene, or frats or sororities proving something to themselves or each other, or teens on a Ray Jardine kick.

"I can do that. You seem to have some idea though. You back packed much?"

"Section walking mostly. Usually the AT. I had an idea to do it. Maybe. When I retire properly. I'm not sure. I always carry too much." He grins. "Hence the need for the challenge. I'm small c conservative and damn I'm always carrying too much."

He gestures to his weekend pack. They're only out for an overnight according to Abigail but the guy has a sixty litre pack and it looks pretty full.

Will smiles at him.

"Sure. I get it. I can help you be a bit imaginative with your gear too. Most people are carrying either too much or too little. I'm sure there will be ways you can cut down a bit. And stay safe. Here. Write down your details."

Will hands Donald his small notebook. Donald traces a fingertip over the paper and glances at Him.

"Waterproof? Nice."

He hands it back and Will checks he can read the email and cell information. He debates asking about the ER team, Hannibal in particular. But, if he doesn't know them, then it's

pointless, and if he does Will ain't sure he wants it getting back to Jack or Hannibal that he was asking around about them. They wait for the last of the bottles to fill. It's a quiet forty minutes all told. Will knows Garret won't be worried. And mostly once the chat has slowed between them they just listen. Will is impressed that the guy knows how to keep quiet. Most people think they do, but can only manage a minute or two. Tops. They fidget. Itch for their cell. Adjust something. They find it hard to resist the pull of company. It was one of the compelling things about Hannibal, his capacity for stillness. His self-containment.

Damn it.

Now he's off on that train of thought again. He tries to ruthlessly clamp down on the thoughts. Nothing good can come of that. Nothing.

When he and Donald rejoin the Hobbs the kettle is just cool enough for Garret to upend it and dump out the ashes before he damps them down with a little water and buries them carefully. Just to be sure. For all that it has rained recently and there is the promise of more in the air you can't be too careful about a lone spark in the woods. That way lies conflagration.

The four of them separate easily. Will alerts them to the presence of the bear. Abigail is briefly excited about some wolf scat they saw on the way up. Even the word 'wolf' makes Wen grumble deep in her chest. Some residual something, a memory, maybe from when she was a pup, someone using the word in anger, or anxiety, or fear. She settles quickly enough with another hug.

When the small party has gone Will takes a moment to check around the ground for any litter. Nothing. Good. He debates his options. When he'd got home all that he'd wanted to do was get out as fast as possible. To get away. Away from four walls, from mailboxes, and email, and cell coverage and social media and that fucking reporter. And. And goddam alphas and their..

He makes himself stop. He mustn't do this to himself. He must not. He pulls off his glasses and rubs his hands over his face, swipes at the moisture gathering at the corners of his eyes. And damn. Gets some grit in them too. He blinks to try and catch it, flush it away. Damn. He tries blinking it away properly, a fast flutter of his eyelid. Then he pulls the upper eyelid carefully out and over and down over the lower one before letting go. He does it again. But the grit is still caught.

As he searches through his bag for his tiny Dopp kit and yeah he can laugh at himself that it is made of cuben he lets his eyes water a little, seeing it if it will flush it out. He blinks as he finds the tiny mirror he keeps wrapped in a little cloth. It's useless really. Suitable only for signalling and this kind of thing that requires close investigation. He blinks the half shed tears away some more. Tries to wipe at the corner of his eye with some tissue. And then he looks more carefully. Then hastily checks the other eye.

No.

It can't be. He didn't. They didn't. But it's there. There is a single ring at the edge of both irises. Coming in gold. Just a sliver. Provisional then. An 'Attachment' rather than a full mating ring though honestly that's bad enough. Isn't it? And damn it all to hell and back. It

says ‘Omega’ like nothing else can. And attached. If it gets wider and darker though? If it doubles? Everyone will know, will be able to see, straight off. He tries to push down the tide of panic that’s building inside his chest. There are meds he can take to hide the colour, switch up his usual suppressants to the plus variety, lenses if it gets more pronounced, if the tentative attachment locks in. Fuck. Ok. It’s manageable. He’s not obliged to say anything to anyone. He’s not. It’s just a provisional attachment. Shit. Maybe that’s why Garrett gave him that look. Why Donald was so nice. Maybe it was visible even then. And, oh god, what if it does develop further? He thinks about the timing. Ok. So. Twelve hours since he first saw Hannibal Fucking Alpha Lecter. Who must be wearing lenses or something because there was nothing and no sign. Except. Well. Except for the painting. Will groans a little and Wen whines back.

Just for a moment Will wonders if Hannibal’s eyes have triple rings now? And how he feels about that. He’s heard of them. But only ever seen one once, on a widow who met and attached with someone new. But only a triple as the the new partner wasn’t an Alpha. Just two Omegas together. The attachment showing but no corresponding bonding ring to mark that rite of passage.

He takes another breath. So it might stay as it is. Just an attachment. And a shaky one at that. Easy to hide. As these things go. Yeah. Easy. He will just have to be a bit careful around the team. Around Hannibal. Make sure he doesn’t. That they don’t.

His appetite for the day is dulled. But a tiny thought keeps poking him. He feels.. what? He feels vindicated. Just a little. He was right. There was something there. Something between them. Something amazing. Substantial. Real. And yeah he could demand his rights. But who wants that? When it comes down to it?

He sighs again. Around him in the woods everything is still. He’s got a choice. Head home or pitch a tarp here, stay overnight, let the trees soothe him.

He puts the tiny mirror away and pushes his glasses back on his nose. Wendigo looks up at him expectantly. She always knows. All right then. Just a night. One night. To look up to the heavens, to let everything look back into him. Think it through calmly.

An attachment? Damn.

Chapter 2

In the morning as he stretches awake in his bivi and bag he feels a lot better. A whole lot. Sure he woke in the night, but once it was to take a leak, all that coffee and water, and yeah, ok, a little whisky late in the evening.. And he was woken in the early hours by a small group of white tail deer. Just four of them, three of them maybe yearlings and one of them an older doe. He hasn't heard the stags yet, but that's coming. Everyone, everything feels the tug and call of spring. Even things buried deep in the earth. Maybe even him, which is why Hannibal had had such an effect.

He sets his fast boiling stove going and digs in his food bag for a ready pot of porridge. It's a small luxury as it has dried apple and cinnamon and powdered milk already mixed in. A little sweetness to start his day. A small happiness. This is his life he thinks to himself, his contented rounded life. Filled with small tidings of gladness; the blue of a jay's wing, the smell of the woodsage, a campfire crackling the pine sap, the taste of hot coffee bitter on the tongue, and the touch.. he sighs. Yeah. He'd felt it. That urge to completeness. His touch. His goddam touch. And those beautiful surgeon's hands.

Ten minutes later though he feels better again. Wen is well watered and is munching her way through the second meal bag she was carrying in her own day pack. He remembers when she was a pup and usually had to be carried herself, snuggling into the space under his armpit, clutched to his chest, sometimes held close to him with a sling. Now though? Now she can carry all her own gear and some of her food too. He rubs her neck. The wiry roughness feeling good under his fingers.

He gets up and stretches. Makes inroads on packing. Stuffs his quilt into its compression spider, rolls up the mat and stows it, and then packs the bivi into its dry bag. It's a matter of moments to take down his shaped tarp and to check the area. The stove is cool to the touch, the coils losing heat almost as fast as they burned. He packs it away, giving the fuel canister just a little shake to check its contents. On a longer trip he'd bring a meths burner and a cone, but for short trips he's always liked the efficiency and speed of his jetboil. And for sure there are smaller and lighter stoves but he just likes it. He smiles. This is exactly the conversation he'll have with Donald, as even he is not immune. He could get the weight down real low. He could. But there's some gear he just likes, feels an affection for, so he'll risk the extra ounces. And yes, eventually they add up to pounds and that's where you have to watch out, get a grip on your own convenience and compromise. Make some changes. He snorts a little. Yeah. Right. Like he's always been so good at that. And extra weight to carry is almost never worth it in the long run. Unless there's a real good reason for it.

Kit and carry is something Jack Crawford's ER team will have to get to grips with, either that or they'll suffer for it. He makes a mental note to do a gear check right at the start of the trip, just to weed out the real excess that any of them might have thought to pack. Even with a kit list. The trip might be meant to be a challenge but it's not really meant to be a trial.

The walk down the hill is better still. He startles a wild turkey, the explosion of feather and noise at his feet causes him to jump back in surprise, makes Wen bark sharply. He lets his

heart rate slow as the turkey bitches off into the undergrowth, all fluff and trot of righteous indignation and injured pride. Wen settles closer to his pants-leg as they carry on.

The path is more or less a straight run back to his cabin. Just one dog-leg turn. Now his thoughts and senses are re-ordered he can take it all in, reckons there is no finer trail within five miles. He marvels once again at his dad's forethought and careful husbandry. It might not have been much but he made it stretch. They both did. Sometimes out of necessity but often times out of a kind of self-sufficient hope. For a rough and ready boat mechanic, he'd made something that was shaped like good. Or good enough. Choices that Will can see were carefully considered and that he has mainly benefited from. It's a powerful legacy that a loving and slightly incomprehending father has left for his unfathomable son. Not just the omega-ness of him, he understood that, all too well sometimes. But his wider more unpredictable oddities. Including, and perhaps especially, Will's utter inability to get lost. From the moment he could take a few faltering steps. Except when he'd intended to. Oh yes. Except when he wanted not to be found. And that desire to vanish hasn't left him. Yet.

He and Wen take the sharp bend that marks the final descent. From here he can just see the roof of the cabin, through a gap in the tree canopy, the result of a lightening strike two bursting summers back. It never fails to give him a thrill. Home. Safe. Secure. An anchorage his dad had called it when they'd first found the site. A place to come back to, to be sure of. And for all that he is generous with his space he's also careful of it, protective, a temporary guardian of something that once was woods and will be once again. Some time.

The next ten minutes are almost always the happiest of any day he's out and about. The last slip down the side of Blood Mountain, and for sure they'd smiled at the name, all because of the iron oxide that leaches from the ground, a broken promise of a land. One they'd made good on. He can almost hear his dad calling to him. Something about coffee, and a whittle. God Will misses him. Misses his warmth. His old man plaid. His sharp short laugh. His calm rough hand on the back of his neck and through his hair. My boy.. my good boy. Maybe that's what he misses. The connection. The love. The sweet small kindnesses. Hannibal had called him responsive. And maybe that's so.

He smiles as he takes the last few steps round the side of the cabin, running his hand lightly over the rough pine of the wall, then up a step onto the porch. And oh. Not today. No easy approach. Today's there's someone waiting for him.

She gets to her feet quickly and dusts herself down, steps towards him, her eyes widening slightly at the smile emptying on his face.

Mischa Lecter.

Damn.

Though he has worked out a line if he needs it.

He stops just in front of her and swings his backpack down onto the floorboards scored and greyed from the weather but sure, another kind of firm and steady. He glances up at her. She looks worried. Not so surprising really.

“Dr Lecter? Well, this is a little unexpected. I’m not even sure how you knew where to find me.”

“Hannibal might have mentioned it.”

“Yeah? Did he? Ok.”

He gestures to the door.

“You coming in. You look a little chilled. You been here long?”

She shivers slightly as if reminded of how poorly she has prepared for this encounter, in all manner of ways.

“I could stand a little coffee. If you don’t mind.”

He unlocks the front door and gestures her inside, not missing even for a moment the querying look she gives the inside of the cabin. Or at least the front room spanning the whole width of the space, a kitchen nook tucked into a back corner, something beyond a closed door to one side. He can see her looking, see her wondering, maybe assessing.

He gets a tea kettle going and watches as she unwinds her long knitted scarf revealing as she does so the bonding collar beneath, carefully laced at the back, a different one to the one she wore yesterday. A very traditional family then. Observant. He supposes she must wear lenses too. Like her husband. Like goddam Hannibal Fucking Fuck off Lecter.

He makes the hot drinks, conscious still of her determined stance in front of the bookshelves. ‘Smart insulation’ his dad had called it when they put in the shelving, smirking his own way round some antique fishing tome Will had picked up someplace fancy. She doesn’t pass any comment when he hands her an undoctored coffee just gestures to a chair.

“Be my guest. I’ll put the heater on. Grab a quilt why don’t you. Tell me what’s on your mind. Might as well be comfortable.”

He makes good on the heater, and she eases onto the edge of an armchair, puts her drink onto a side table and then seems at a loss about what to do with her hands tangling in her lap. She picks the drink up again. Gives herself an excuse to fiddle.

“I need to ask you what happened.”

She leans forwards earnestly.

“Please Dr Graham. Will. With Hannibal. What happened?”

Will takes a careful considered mouthful of his own drink and puts a hand out to Wendigo. He shrugs his shoulders.

“Nothing happened. Nothing at all. You’ve no call to be concerned.”

He pauses delicately.

“If that’s even what this is. But nothing happened you need have any concern about.”

She touches her fingertips to her collar, frowns a little harder.

“Are you sure? Really? Are you sure? Hannibal wouldn’t..”

She trails off and he shrugs again.

“What can I say. I can’t speak for Dr Lecter.” He pauses a moment, takes a small breath. “The other Dr Lecter. But as far as I was concerned, nothing occurred. Of any note.”

“He said he kissed you.”

“Did he? I suppose. If you can call it that.”

Will stretches his back and then drains his mug, a small scald but a welcome distraction from the pain. This is about as hard as he thought it might be.

“Dr Lecter. Mischa. If we’re going with given names, I don’t know what he said, but I can promise you, you have nothing whatsoever to worry about.”

She looks down into her cup and then back up to him, she makes a helpless gesture at his face.

“But, your eyes?”

“My eyes?” He tries for a tone of genuine query. “Oh. Yeah. Right.” He pauses and smiles. Now it comes. He can do this.

“Yesterday? Yesterday I was wearing lenses. Today I’m not. Not so good in the woods. All kinds of trouble with dust, pollen, leaf litter. Even this morning I got some soot in my eyes. Should have seen me cry it out. So at home I stick to spectacles. No lenses. As simple as that. Makes it easier all round.”

She nods slowly.

“I can see it might.. Yes. All right. I’m sorry. I just thought..”

He holds up a placating hand.

“Like I said. Absolutely nothing for you to worry about.” He gestures to her cup. “Can I get you another?”

He thinks he manages the smile pretty well in the circumstances.

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Two weeks earlier....

The small girl looks tentative as she reaches out a hand towards the hybrid wolf-dog. Wen is as gentle as they come but the child is right to be careful with an unfamiliar animal even if she has been told that it is ok to pet her.

Will Graham smiles round at the class of ten year olds. These day or weekend groups of school kids are really bread and butter work to him – meet Wendigo (half wolf/half dog), find and follow her tracks round the property, go on a nature based treasure trail, learn three knots and how to use them, build a debris shelter, learn how to make fire without matches or a lighter (in older groups there's always someone who manages it much to everyone's oooh-ing delight), decide on the five bits of kit they'd take for a wilderness trip, draw, write a story. The list goes on and really Will has an endless variety of combinations depending on what the teacher or group leader or pastor or whoever wants. In some groups the kids get to negotiate for what they want, and isn't that a skill in and of itself? It can take half a morning just to do that part of the day.

Really? The easiest (and if he's scrupulously honest with himself, and Will tries so hard to be, also the most boring) are day things with ten and eleven year olds. They are big enough to actually do things but not so big they're a problem. And most of them manage some hero-worship for the bearded and bespectacled woodsman running the class. Though Will is astute enough to know that that may be mostly down to Wen.

The little girl has plucked up enough courage and now has her hands sunk in the ruff around Wendigo's neck. Wen is the colour of all timber wolves but with some extra amber and dark hair on her belly. Will has had her since she was a pup and she is as loyal and devoted as they come. He's had hybrids before, the breed usually proving to be too much dog for some people and too much wolf for others. Wen though is just right and Will smiles as the dog grumbles happily at the attention.

The child suddenly smiles and Will remembers all the reasons why it is good to do these days. Something just a little out of the comfort zone for these town and city kids. Nothing actually, actively dangerous per se, but certainly with a good facsimile of it.
The class members shift, proud of their own. And Will grins a little at the teacher.

"Ok folks, last thing for the day, because you've all been so great."

There is a chorus of groans and whines from the children. Really Dr Graham is an awesome guy; for all that he lives in a cabin in the woods, with a wolf and a truck and miles of endless forest for company.

He sets them on the final task of the day and they spend the next half hour working together to collect each object and article needed to tell a particular story. An hour later and the whole day is done. Will waves to everyone as they board the big yellow bus that's waiting on the service road that runs next to the edge of his property.

When he's seen all the kids clamouring to wave from the back seats of the bus and he and Wendigo have finished waving he turns back to the path home. He stops for a moment and breathes it all in. The ravens up in the big hickory out back, the phoebes, the few dangling chrysalis, the chestnut that might or might not have blight, the hemlock and spruce, the scott's pine, the small hedge of rosemary, the creeping fauna, the mycelia, the lichens and

moss, the insects. Everything. Every glorious thing. Biting, stinging, teethy, soft, sweet and deadly. And so full of life. He appreciates what he has here, and has worked for it. These woods are lovely.

Off down the road he can hear the school bus at the bad bend having to rev against the incline and camber. What's more unusual is the car horn he hears next. Strange, maybe someone lost; the woods can fuck with GPS signals, if you can even get one at all. If they're really lost whoever they are could spend an eternity out here getting more and more confused and turned around. And that's just on the roads, and plenty of the maps don't show all the service roads, or even all the minor state roads. And don't even get him started on the tracks and trails!

He has had plenty of overnight rambles interrupted by hikers lost and desperate stumbling into his camp on some trail. Or even occasionally appearing at his cabin, sometimes wide-eyed and only partially coherent.

The woods can do that to you. They are lovely and all Christmas card like, the stuff of romance and 1000 mile ambitions, at least at a distance or on a card, or in a book, but when you are in them? They are just endless cubic feet of bristle and indignation; where natural light fights to make it to the forest floor; where every view on a 360 degree turn is pretty much the same; where you take a step off a trail to take a piss and you turn back around and dammit where the fuck is the path?

So, he gets a fair few people lost up here. And just sometimes he gets asked to look, but more often it's just an accidental find, or someone finds him.

Only twice, well, three times, has he found people who didn't make it at all. And that's usually been because of dehydration and exposure. Though there was one guy he's not so sure about. It probably was just the weather plus poor clothing choice and an inadequate tent and the post-mortem animal predation made it really hard to be sure, but Will still wonders if it was a murder.

He'd had the Feds in. This close to State lines the situation was unclear and he'd spent ten days bumping into blue-jacketed ball cap wearing men and women all over the edge of his property and out into the federal reserve. But nothing came of the investigation so Will just wonders about it.

He leans on a tree, the only crab apple on his land. Left over from when this had been tentative farming country, a few people clearing spaces in the woods trying to eke out a little life. He waits to see what the deal with the car is, and if its occupants are lost. He's somewhat surprised by the big sedan that inches round the corner just below where he's standing. Either the driver is an optimist or he did in fact check out the roads before coming up here.

When the car stops beside him Will leans down and in over the window on the passenger's side looking in at the driver and his companion, the window drops smoothly on an electric hum.

"Help you?"

With the window all the way down Will catches the re-circulating air of the AC and just the very faintest tang in the background. The two men or at least one of them has had a bit of a shit ride if the stress scent is anything to go by. It would be beyond rude to mention it, but one of these guys is definitely an Alpha, maybe both of them. And for sure Will could really do without two unknown Alpha men just turning up like this out of the blue. Even if one of them is a double ring.

“Dr Graham?”

“Sure.” Will replies, “You found him. What can I do for you?”

The smaller of the two men in the car heaves a sigh of relief, or something similar,

“Well, thank goodness for that. Honestly, why you have to be all the way back here in the middle of nowhere I can’t say.”

The other guy, bigger and bulkier, the one with the double-ringed irises, makes to lay a hand on his passenger’s arm but seems to change his mind.

“Fred? That’s kind of the point. Dr Graham, anywhere we can park up? You might remember I wrote to you a while back? My name’s Jack Crawford.”

Will pauses a beat, he remembers the letter.

“Dr Crawford, Johns Hopkins right? Trauma Unit lead? I remember. You can park up just up the way a bit, there’s a pull off, you’ll see my truck, plenty of room to turn, and it’s hard core underneath. You won’t get stuck.”

He takes a step back across the road and rests a hand in Wendigo’s fur. The hybrid looks up at him, all trust and friendship. As the two men drive away to park up Will waits for them to come back.

In the teething silence of the wood.

Chapter 3

Crawford is the better prepared of the two of them, both his shoes and his coat are sensible of the terrain and the late Spring weather. The other guy is kind of dapper but his shoes would be useless on a wetter day and really it's a good job he won't have to spend any time outside because his jacket is one of those fashionable outdoorsy things which look good but kill you fast if the weather turns bad.

Will smiles at them a little, and Crawford looks a little pissed when the little guy pipes up,

"So, Dr Graham, we've heard all about you. You're quite the topic of conversation in psychiatric circles. That thing you do!"

Will just looks at him and then turns to look at Crawford and raises an eyebrow.

"I thought you were all surgical."

Crawford nods,

"We are, but some of my colleagues like to try and keep up with the other disciplines."

He puts the faintest of emphasise on 'try' and flicks a glance sideways. Will knows he's irritated about the faux pas.

The little guy holds out his hand and Will reluctantly shakes it. He'd compare it to shaking hands with a wet fish but that would be unkind to the fish.

"I'm Frederick Chilton. You might have heard my name."

Will is marginally too polite to shit on the guy but for real? Why would he?

"Really? Ok. Good. You want to both come up to the cabin and we can go through what you're looking for."

The two men seem eager, seduced by the woods and the smell of sap rising, and as Will takes them up the path to his home he points out various things, certain trees and plants, the condition and terrain underfoot, a little something about the weather, the season, just making nice, the kind of stuff he has learnt that puts people at their ease out here.

Inside the cabin the three men decant their shoes and boots at the door and Crawford is clearly impressed by Will's collections neatly shelved around the living room and office; skulls; lures; hand carved wood and bone; knives and axes; fossils; everything that says woodsman and maybe experimental archaeologist or primitive skills; palaeontologist perhaps. In all Will has what he thinks of as a narrow range of things he's an expert in, but a much broader range of things he's got a fair handle on. And sure other people might call him an expert but he reckons he's somewhere a bit more than good but he wouldn't want to say definitive.

His thing though? As Chilton called it? He can read a landscape and everything in it, and how it works, and what's wrong, or missing, or what's been fucked with in some way. It is as though he is a forest-whisperer, not just for the animals but for everything. It means he is almost never ever lost. And that he is never ever afraid when he is outdoors. Almost everything around him in the natural world is a potential ally to Will, which is really something given that he sees most people as shits. And yeah, he knows where all the ironies are in that.

"I can offer you coffee or tea if you'd like?"

Crawford sits and stretches out in one of the indicated sprawling armchairs,

"Coffee with half and half, teaspoon of sugar. Thanks. I'm kind of desperate."

"Long week?"

Will eyes him moderately sympathetically, trauma unit in a big hospital? Got to be stressful and even if you're at the top of the tree the hours must be really something; just for the team as a whole and Crawford has probably got a shit load of paperwork and egos and politics that he has to navigate as well.

"Long year. Fred? Coffee?"

"Coffee as well Dr Graham. Black. No sugar." He pauses a moment and adds almost as an afterthought, "thank you."

Will sets a pot brewing on the battered range in the adjoining kitchen and watches the two men watch Wendigo, stretched out on the rug in front of the wood burner. Frederick asks,

"Not a full wolf is she? Hybrid? What's the mix?"

Will manages a small smile, if the question didn't sound so un-interested he'd warm to it, but it sounds like someone angling for some kind of advantage. Still. If this job comes off it will mean a lot of money. Sure, that's not his biggest motivation, it's not really any kind of motivation to him, but it's not nothing, and it would set him up at least for the rest of the year. So he answers easily,

"Good spot. Half wolf, part husky, maybe something else in there too, just to mix it up a little. She was a rescue."

Crawford reaches a hand towards Wen, palm of his hand upwards,

"Beautiful girl. Mia Bella. Aren't you?"

Wen gets a soppy look on her face and pants up at Crawford, wiggles across on her belly towards the man, accepts a hand round her ears and jawline. Will smiles a little to see it.

"You're good with her. She likes you."

Crawford doesn't answer for a minute.

“Yeah? I like her too. My wife has allergies. Otherwise I’d have a whole pack. Coming up though, the hours would have been against it.”

Will brings the two men their coffee and they each settle back into their seats, the warmth working on Crawford and Chilton, the familiarity and security of his own home working to relax Will a little.

Still, they’re here for business and it’s better to set to it. Even if the days are lengthening Crawford will want to get away before they lose too much of the light.

“Ok Dr. Crawford, I think I’ve got the gist of it, seven of you, all senior surgeons in the trauma team, two weeks, team building, wilderness experience, some managed risk, some excitement, a lot of variety and challenge. Sound about right?”

He takes a mouthful of his drink and Crawford answers him,

“Call me Jack. And yeah, that’s about the whole of it. Emphasis on activities that make us work together and not fucking compete all the time.”

Chilton shifts awkwardly and Will smiles faintly,

“I imagine you’re in a competitive business?”

Perhaps he’s not so surprised that it’s Chilton who pipes up.

“It’s competitive on the way up. Now we’ve arrived? We should be pulling together.”

Will nods. Ah. Right. Internal conflicts. Crawford confirms it.

“We had two old hands retire recently and we also got a little extra money come in. So we’ve got four established members; me, Fred, guy called Abel Gideon, he’s been around for years, good guy, Tobias Budge, Toby, fantastic, great sense of humour, very gifted too. The four of us.” He gestures to include Frederick. “The four of us have worked together for years now. Two newbies, Randall Tier, he was a junior in the team and has moved up. And Matthew Brown. We got him from Philly. And we’ve got a visiting fellow, European. Not French, though he’s come to us from Paris, Hannibal Lecter, amazing skills, nice guy, but aloof, and, well, European, a little eccentric perhaps. But. Really good.”

Chilton interjects again.

“Eccentric is fine. Arrogant is not.”

Will raises both eyebrows.

“He’s arrogant?”

Crawford holds up a hand.

“Fred and he have clashed a little over technique. Lecter’s great but he’s still finding his feet. It’s a three year fellowship. He’s only four months in.”

Frederick scowls into his cup.

“He’s very skilled. And he knows it.”

Will looks between the two men.

“Anything else, or is it just a case of helping Dr Lecter find his fit in the team?”

Crawford sighs and rubs a hand over his face. Will suspects it is a characteristic gesture outside the hygiene discipline of the operating theatre.

“Honestly? Hannibal has just made the internal conflicts visible to us all. Actually it’s been useful in that respect. I suspect I’d have just tried to ignore the under currents otherwise.

It’s a humble admission and Frederick frowns at it.

“We’re saving lives Jack. That’s what matters. Overall. Wouldn’t you say?”

Will can see that it’s a familiar argument between them when Jack sighs some more and says.

“We are. We do. And we could be better at it.”

He turns an eye on Will and drains his coffee.

“Can I beg another? So. Yeah. We need to communicate better; needs, expectations, concerns, all that good stuff.”

Will nods and echoes him back.

“All that good stuff. I get it.”

He takes Jack’s mug and then holds his hand out to Dr Chilton.

“You too?”

Frederick shrugs and Will goes back to the stove.

Later on when they’re gone, he reviews the whole story.

Seven men, all Alphas, top of their field, competitive and collaborative, single minded, mix of ages, married, single, widowed, bonded, a mix of sexualities. Moderately fit, Jack had laughed about Olympic golds for standing in one place for hours on end just fiddling inside people’s bodies. A mix of race and ethnic identities, and religious affiliation. A mixed bag Jack had explained. Men who do and don’t like each other, who do and don’t respect each other, who do and don’t work that well together. All finding their new fit in one of the leading trauma surgery teams in the country.

And Jack gets to call the shots on this. Will considers the effort it must have taken to get cover for seven top surgeons for a whole fortnight, well, sixteen days really. Crawford must

really want this. Or, more realistically, he really wants the team to work. Sixteen days? Will can do a lot with them in sixteen days.

And neither of the two surgeons had twitched, even once, even after two hours in the close confines of the cabin. Neither of them could have possibly suspected. Good.

Will clicks his fingers at Wendigo. Just occasionally being a non-secretor has its upsides. Wen nuzzles into Will's hand. She doesn't care about his complementary gender status in the slightest. And he is pretty sure that they can get through the whole two weeks and none of them would be any the wiser that he isn't a Beta or even a gracile Alpha. He smiles. It is a lot of money, and might even be some fun. Heck, he'd pay pretty good money to see Frederick Chilton slip over in his fancy shoes, get a little grubby, just once. He finishes the finger of whisky he's drinking. He does the math on his suppressant doses. Smiles.

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Jack Crawford looks at his two team members, junior to him only in job title, for God's sake Lecter has more experience than him even.

"Hannibal. Matthew. The good news is that the patient will be fine and as a consequence the family isn't suing. The bad news? You're not out of the woods on this. I want to know what the hell happened."

Matthew Brown looks ready to blow a gasket and Hannibal nods to him.

"I think my esteemed colleague may have things he would like to say first."

Matthew looks beyond irritated. He has been thoroughly caught out by the courtesy of the moment, it's true, he'd wanted to get his version of events in first with Jack, but now that Lecter has been so polite about it, it's harder to just get it all out there. Jack slides his eyes to him.

"Matthew? Ok. You want to take me through it."

Matthew takes a deep breath and then runs through the main events that occurred in the operating theatre just a few days ago. At the end of his account he half turns in his seat to see how Hannibal fucking fuck off too good to be true responds. He narrows his eyes when Hannibal simply says.

"Mr Brown performed a difficult job admirably."

Crawford and Brown both look at him, waiting for the other shoe to drop, but Hannibal says nothing further. Eventually, after an uncomfortable few moments he remarks.

"I truly have nothing further to add."

"You closed?"

"I did. Mr Brown seemed tired. It had been a difficult procedure and unusually long. It seems like a reasonable course of action in the circumstances."

Jack glances at Matthew.

“Which you took up?”

“Yes.” He grits his teeth. “But only because I didn’t want to make a fuss. There was no need to fight about it.”

Hannibal raises his eyebrows.

“I did not realise you were so dismayed.”

“You implied I wasn’t up to it.”

“That was not my intention.”

Matthew grinds his back teeth, just a quick aggravated noise, he glares at Hannibal. Jack holds up his hand.

“Ok. I get the picture. Matthew you had a shit long surgery, what, eight hours? Nine? Hannibal you stepped in to close. Matthew, you accepted. It was a bit messy at the need. Hannibal you got it all tied and tidied away? Ok. So. The two of you? Matthew, you were shattered. No. Don’t deny it. Don’t argue with me. Hannibal I imagine you were concerned for Matthew and the patient?”

Hannibal glances at his colleague.

“I’m afraid Mr Brown is correct if he assumes my first priority was with the patient. He looked compromised.”

It isn’t quite clear if Hannibal means Matthew or the patient. Matthew snaps.

“I was fine. I admit. Tired. But fine.”

Smoothly Hannibal answers him.

“I’m sure you were. I only said you looked it. As did the patient.”

Jack sighs. Again. He points first at Matthew and then at Hannibal.

“Ok. You were tired. We’ve established that. And you finished up. Right. Both of you. Matthew it’s ok to be exhausted. Hannibal it’s more acceptable to ask rather than to state? Ok? Honestly guys. Stop dicking about. Please, for the love of god. Shake hands or something. Anything. I don’t want to see the two of you in front of me like this again? Got it?”

Hannibal nods, mostly unperturbed by the incident. His over-riding priority had been the patient, and the maintenance, if he was brutally honest with himself of a near perfect record. Well, perfect, according to his lights. That he had been mildly concerned for his colleague was almost coincidental. Almost.

As they're leaving, Jack stops them briefly.

"Look. I nearly forgot. Take a few copies. Spread them round the team. Kit list from Will Graham, for the wilderness thing, Ok? Hannibal, make sure Abel gets a copy. I'll talk to Fred. Matt, give one to Randall and Toby. Ok? Got it?"

When the door is closed behind them Hannibal stops Matthew with a hand to his sleeve.

"Mr Brown. I did not quite apologise. That was remiss of me."

Matthew looks at him. God he's so damn suave and bloody European. And traditional. That fucking bonding collar. Bastard. Even if he is good.

"Yeah. All right. Gracious of you. Thanks. And next time I'll ask."

"And next time I'll offer."

A little further along the corridor the two men separate at the top of a set of stairs; Matthew off to the canteen and Hannibal heading towards his own small office. Shared with one of the other team members but quite adequate in all other respects. When he tries the unlocked door and it opens he isn't surprised to find Abel Gideon inside.

He reflects, not for the first time in his fellowship, that of all the people Jack Crawford could have roomed him with Abel was and probably still is the best choice, or rather, the least worst. They are not so far apart in age and Abel has similar but not competing interests and specialisms. They have just enough in common to be able to socialise but not so much that they're really buddy buddy, or worse, competitors.

He likes Abel's wife, pursuing her own academic interests at Georgetown. And quite friendly with his darling Mischa which has been helpful too.

Abel looks up and smiles briefly.

"So then Hannibal? How'd it go. Get it all sorted?"

"I believe so. I am content with both the outworking and the outcome."

"And no one died?"

Hannibal quirks a small smile back, really, it's no more than just a press of his lips together.

"As you say. Neither on the table.."

Abel laughs and finishes off the quote.

".. nor off. Good job Hannibal. And did Matthew think you apologised?"

Abel smiles again. He and Hannibal have discussed the two younger Alpha surgeons extensively. He thinks they've got the measure of Matthew Brown and Randall Tier. Hannibal twitches a wider smile.

“I believe he did.”

“Well, I think that calls for a drink. Not today though. I’m on a late. At the weekend?”

Hannibal settles into the chair behind his own desk. He picks up a file on a recent patient and looks at Abel over the top of it.

“Come to dinner Abel. Help dilute Randall and Frederick for me?”

“Only if you do those fantastic potatoes in duck fat Hannibal. I’m not ponying up for anything less. Mischa coming?”

“It’s not impossible.”

“Shall I bring my best beloved?”

“If you think she won’t demolish Frederick. No deaths over dinner. There’s no lost love there I think?”

Abel makes a face at him.

“Long story. I’ll tell you it some time. When we’ve all drunk too much. But if mention the potatoes and duck fat I think I can swing it.”

“Good. Oh, yes. Jack asked me to give you this. It’s the kit list of things we need for the expedition.”

Abel rolls his eyes but takes it readily enough when Hannibal leans towards him with his arm outstretched. Jack and his team building ideas. He runs an eye down it. And then sits up a little more sharply.

“Have you read this?”

Hannibal unpockets his own copy and gives the two sides of foolscap a closer read. At the end is a brief biography of Will Graham and some highlights of his career to date. Interesting. Hannibal pays it no further mind.

“Abel?”

“Well it’s just a bit more involved than I’d thought. I don’t know. I’d just thought about a couple of nights rolled up in blanket beside some campfire. I’ll have to google half this stuff. Oh well.”

Hannibal smiles. And considers that it is just possible that Abel is slightly better than the least worst option. Mentally he readjusts the menu for the weekend. And his shopping list.

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Randall Tier grins briefly at Tobias Budge when he sits down opposite him in the canteen.

“Is that for me? God. Thanks Tobes. I’m so tired.”

“I expect you are. You on later?”

“Yeah. But only second to Abel. And not for a few hours. I’m going for some kip later. Get a few hours in hopefully.”

“Have my office. Fred’s already on. The couch is better than yours. Has Matthew seen the almighty yet?”

Randall laughs.

“I’m not sure if you mean Jack or Hannibal. Or both.”

Tobias drinks his coffee.

“Both. Either. Which ever you like?”

“I don’t know. But ask him yourself. I can see him queuing. And thanks. The coffee’s good.”

“Surprisingly perhaps.”

“I’m used to it.”

Tobias and Randall smile lazily at each other. They do all right as a team in surgery and get on outside too.

“Has our esteemed fellow had you round for dinner yet?”

Randall makes a subtle kind of smirk.

“He’s asked me for this Saturday. What do you think? Is he making a move?”

Tobias eyes him over the edge of his own mug, inhales the steam rising from it. Randall is right. It’s not bad at all. And he too is used to it.

“Do you want him to?”

Randall grins a little.

“What’s not to like. Thoroughbred. European.”

He counts items off his fingers as thought ticking off a list. One thing at a time.

“Attractive; wealthy; dedicated; well connected; aesthete; going places.”

Tobias smiles slightly, mirroring Randall’s look.

“And no significant other. No attachment even. You open to Alpha/Alpha then?”

“Could be. For the right Alpha.”

He looks up.

“Hey Matthew.”

Matthew carefully places the tray he has brought on the table between them and then flops into one of the moulded plastic chairs, like a marionette whose strings have been cut. He frowns at the tray and then at his colleagues. Perhaps already regretting his choices.

“Before you ask. Hannibal apologised and I looked like a right idiot.”

Tobias leans towards him, just about resisting the impulse to glance at Randall.

“Did he now. And what exactly did the good doctor say?”

Matthew frowns again. Not keen on the sceptical tone in his colleague’s voice.

“Wait. What? He definitely apologised.”

The two other men don’t say a word and Matthew slumps in his seat.

“Ahh. shit. The fucker.”

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Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

> Passing reference to deliberate death of rodents for personal gain.
>
> I know you're reading in the Hannibal fandom, but hey, no judgement here about what does and doesn't weird people out or upset them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mischa Lecter laughs as she runs a finger down the list Hannibal has given her.

"All this? Just for two weeks? Can we hire any of it?"

Hannibal comes to stand behind her and rests a hand on her shoulder as he follows her finger. He gently strokes his thumb along the lacing of her bonding collar. It had belonged to their mother once upon a time. A long time ago now.

"Abel said the same thing. It's not so bad. I'm sure I have some things that I can adapt. Don't I?"

She laughs again.

"You've got gloves, scarf and a warm hat. Honestly Hannibal there's nothing else you have that's even faintly suitable. Except for shoes. I think your walking boots will be fine."

She smiles some more.

"What are the others doing? I can't really see any of them as officianados of the great outdoors. Abel runs marathons doesn't he? Anyone else do anything remotely involving the weather?"

Hannibal laughs and then drops into a chair next to the long side table in the living room. He make a face and then smiles at the large portrait over the mantelpiece opposite where he sits.

"Nothing so crude. Though I think Jack isn't totally immune to the charms of certain flora and fauna. Anyway you can ask some of them yourself. Abel, Randall and Frederick are all coming for dinner on Saturday."

She raises both eye brows at him.

"Are Toby and Mr Brown both on the rota? What about Jack?"

“Jack’s on a late, and the others are paired with juniors. So just the three of them. Oh. And Mrs G, If Abel can persuade her.”

Mischa makes a face at him and sits down opposite, just under the portrait. He looks between her face in the painting and the reality, ten years after the picture was finished. It’s a fine likeness, in the manner of Eighteenth century European family and marriage portraits. His parents had a similar one, this had been one of the last gifts of his father. He pays closer attention to what his beloved sister is saying.

“Abel I get. Fred? Well. I suppose. And Randall. Why Randall? Hannibal?”

She watches him, he smiles very faintly at her. She taps the list against her knee.

“You know I’m not interested. You do, don’t you?”

He makes a small assenting gesture.

“I’m not trying to set you up darling. I wouldn’t.”

She narrows her eyes. They both know he might if he thought it would do any good.

“All right. As long as we’re on the same page about it.” She pauses and considers the careful blankness of his expression. “What about you though? Are you interested in him? He’s got that kind of delicacy you like. All fine boned gracile.”

Hannibal smiles a little more.

“I’m not totally disinterested, but I’d like to see him out of his usual habitat before I give the idea much attention.”

She smiles in some surprise. Her brother hasn’t been interested in anyone romantically for several years. She looks at the list again.

“Well, your little adventure should give you plenty of opportunity to get the measure of him.”

“I think so. And in the meantime? Dinner at the weekend?” He pauses for a moment. “I know you’ve met him twice, but I would value your opinion.”

“Would you now?” She smiles some more. “All right then. I’ll pay a bit more attention than usual in that case.”

“And no flirting with Frederick. He’ll just get flustered.”

She grins.

“Spoilsport.”

Hannibal laughs.

“And you’ll help me with the kit? I rather fear you might be right.”

“I am right. Even if we have got some of it, it will all be ridiculously heavy. You should get some decent light-weight gear. I’m sure you could donate it after or something. This guide..” She flicks the paper and reads the biographical notes again. “Will Graham. He sounds rather interesting. Have you read this properly? It’s quite amusing. He might know someone or some group, who could benefit from some camping things. I’ll ask the others too. On Saturday.” She frowns a little at the list. “I have no idea what ‘dyneema’ even is.”

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Two of the teenagers launch themselves at the debris shelter whilst the third looks up at them nervously from where he is lying mostly inside the rough structure. The shelter they have only recently finished withstands their onslaught. The three kids and Will test the other two shelters. Then they go through the serious business of drawing lots to decide which boy gets which structure.

“All right. Another hour on insulation and then we’ll skin the squirrels and roast them. Good enough?”

The boys can’t help but look at him as though he’s some kind of woodland god. For all that he’s not wild about whole classes of teenagers he quite likes these small birthday trips. Just a few kids, overnight on the mountain, stories, shelters, squirrels, water. Everything memorable and actually pretty easy, but every activity seems like a big deal. They don’t have to do the squirrel if they’re really squeamish, just like he has a back up tarp if the debris shelters collapse or there’s not enough leaf litter to provide a comfortable night. And he knows the water is potable even if they don’t filter it too well. And he keeps a real close eye on any edible plants they harvest just to be sure they are actually edible.

These three boys, all Betas he thinks, just on the cusp of adolescence, probably a bit geeky at school, utterly obsessed with primitive skills and still of an age or disposition where they are willing to listen, to watch, and most importantly he thinks, to wonder. They’re good kids. He quite likes them. He wonders himself if the seven surgeons will do anywhere near as well with the shelters or if they’ll think it’s a bit beneath them. They’ll probably manage the squirrels all right. Though you can never tell what does and doesn’t upset people. He smiles as he watches the three kids. They’ve opted to help each other for twenty minutes each rather than spend an hour solo on their own shelter. Jack Crawford would love it.

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The next morning all three children, because really, they’re still children when it comes down to it, look more than a little the worse for wear. Happy though. They all claim to have slept and to have been warm enough. Will grins at them, and lets them get away with the 3 a.m. chocolate bar exchange they’d engaged in, all soto voce and whispered delight at having deceived their accompanying adult. Nice, Will thinks, memorable, for all of them, for all the right reasons, and they’ve been utterly scrupulous about tidying up after themselves as well, even if that was mainly to maintain the small deceits they’d perpetrated. He’ll take it.

They spend the morning learning some simple knapping skills and by lunch all three of them have turned out a workable blade from the stone Will has brought with him. They’ve also managed to light a fire off a flint and strike spark. If the weather had been better recently he

might have got them doing a fire plough or bow drill but it's never much fun to plan for kids to fail at something that excites them. Why would he, so a flint and bit of iron pyrite it is. Fool's gold he tells the boys. But with fire within if released the right way. He can see why it looks like magic.

There is laughter and satisfaction when they walk back to the cabin, the birthday boy's dad waiting on the porch enjoying the afternoon sunshine. Will smiles a hello.

"They did good. You should be proud."

The dad, a double ringed omega male with a sweet expression has a glad and fond hand for his boy. He ruffles the kid's hair.

"I'm always proud. You have a good time?"

The boy looks at his father and nods happily.

"Really awesome. I've got some squirrel stew in my bag. And Joel made a really great blade."

The father glances to Will, smiles and nods his thanks. The goodbyes are followed by quiet as the four of them follow the track out to the road. Will watches them go and raises a hand in fare well when the boy turns at the corner that has the last line of sight towards the cabin. He waves. Will smiles. Takes a deep breath. Doesn't think about what he doesn't have.

He sighs. The next ten days will be all about the trip for the surgeons. He goes back into the cabin, finds a telephone number, goes to the old rotary dial up and calls his usual supplier.

"Alana? Hey. Will Graham."

He listens for a few moments and a small smile hovers on his face. He likes her. She's sweet. Though there's nothing between them. Though if he was clearly an Alpha kind of Alpha he wonders if she might be more interested.

"I'm looking at a party of eight in ten days time. Sixteen days worth. Can I drop the list in day after tomorrow?"

He laughs at something she says on the other end of the line.

"That's pretty much it. They're all adults. Alphas. It's part of the deal that they carry it."

He laughs again at the comment she makes on whatever she thinks of seven Alphas and Will out in the woods carrying their own food between them along with everything else.

"Yeah. I hope so. No special diets. One mildly lactose intolerant. Apart from that? Just the usual."

Just the usual.

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When he sees the list Frederick does his much anticipated grumble. But Jack is well used to Frederick and is ready for it. He takes no prisoners.

“You met him. He knows what he’s doing. He won’t get us lost or eaten by a goddam bear. You’re staring to piss me off Fred. What’s your problem? I thought you liked the whole outdoor gig?”

Frederick scrunches up his nose, does a thing with his eyes which makes him look like a startled rabbit in the headlights. Really, if you didn’t know the guy was a seventh generation scion of the East Coast, and no one is ever going to be allowed to forget that thank you very much, well, you’d never know he was an Alpha.

“I’m just being careful Jack. A lot can happen in two weeks. And have you actually read this list.”

He flicks the offending piece of paper with a fore finger. Jack settles back in his office chair and steeples his hands in front of him, his elbows resting on his stomach. He waits for the tide of Frederick’s worries to wash up on the shore of his desk.

“And your point is?”

“It’s long. It’s ridiculous. Who has this stuff. And his annotations. Does he think we’re idiots?”

Jack manages a small sardonic look.

“I don’t know Fred. What do you think. He met the two of us? What impression do you think we made?” He sighs. “Look he tells you where you can hire stuff, or buy it with a discount from a supplier he knows, and where you can donate it after if you feel like it. What can I say. He’s thought it through. You want an actual budget Fred?”

Frederick twitches a little and looks down at the list again. He stubs a finger down each item.

‘The Kit List - we’ll do a check in the first day to make sure everyone has what they need, rather than what they think they want.

Sleep kit

Sleeping mat - an inflatable is good, get one that’s long enough and thick enough. Because you do actually want to sleep through the night, not undergo some outdoor version of the third circle of hell.

Sleeping bag or sleeping quilt - down is warmer and lighter but a bitch if you get it wet, so don’t. Three season at least. Add a silk or micro fleece liner if you run cold. Make sure your bag is big enough. Sleep in it at least once before the trip.

Stuff bag - make sure it’s dyneema or sil nylon. Keeping your sleeping bag dry matters. You can use this as a pillow case too, there are fleece lined ones if you like. These are comfy and don’t make a hissy slippy scratchy noise when you go to sleep and rub your stubble and beard all over them. Try not to rustle all night. Your tent mate will thank you.

Ear plugs - the woods are noisy and I bet at least one of your colleagues snores. You do too.

We'll split four tents between the eight of us. Yeah. You're gonna get to know someone real well. We can switch around if you like but it works best to stick with one person for the duration as you learn their habits and how to share a confined space. I'll supply the tents as this would be a big outlay.

Cooking gear

Plate, bowl, cup, cutlery - decent plastic or titanium, nothing you 'borrowed' from some takeout place.

Sharp knife which locks open and closed. None of this army penknife shit that will collapse on your finger if you press on it.

One three/quarter pint cooking pot, one deep pot or deep frying pan, one kettle - aluminium or titanium for single person use.

Alcohol stove (See the YouTube video url for how to make your own), wind proof lighter, wind proof matches, half pint of methylated spirits, in a bottle that doesn't leak but double bag it just in case in ziplocks. Pot stand that fits the stove and whatever pans you're bringing with you, nothing sadder than dinner that dumps out all over the ground because the stand was too small. (This is your emergency back up cook kit. Usually we'll cook over an open fire. But just in case it rains the whole fortnight this will mean hot drinks and food.)

Two litre water bottles - preferably ones that can take boiling water and are flexible (can double as hot water bottles for the night when it unexpectedly drops in temperature, because it will.)

Squeezable water filter - there's a range on the market. Try and find one that fits your water bottles.

Small essentials

Wash kit - if you can possibly manage it make do without shaving or lens kits (contrary to popular belief no one will actually care about your status in the woods, if you need them to actually see I'd recommend spectacles. Dust and pollen are not your friends.) Toothbrush, comb, small plastic mirror, biodegradable soap and toothpaste, deodorant of some kind preferably without a strong smell, bears love certain deodorants and colognes, so you know, don't. No one wants a date with a bear. Packable towel, maybe a wash cloth too.

Two clothes pegs. Fold up sink. You can get these in a dollar store. You'll thank me later. So will your tent mate.

Lightweight trowel and biodegradable toilet paper - One roll per two days. Trust me on this. If you get the right kind it's real nice stuffed in the bottom of your pillow case. Hmm. Soft.

Head torch and spare battery. You might also want to bring a small hanging lantern. A candle lantern is nice, but a tiny electric one will be lighter. Your choice.

Two water-proof stuff sacks - for clothes. Really water proof. Test under shower in advance. Go on. Try it. Still dry? You're fine.

Any meds you take, pain killers, plasters, I'll have a proper first aid kit with me, but bring a small kit of your own, anti-histamine, burn ointment, blister kit.

Optional

You could also bring a fold up chair that will take your sleeping mat and fold it like a bit of origami into something you can actually sit on comfortably for extended periods without killing your back. And isn't heavy. This might be the one optional bit of kit you actually do want to bring.

What to wear

No denim. That said you can wear pretty much what you like. I'd suggest a mix of wool, silk, cotton and some of the very clever new fabrics.

Three long sleeved shirts and two short sleeved shirts - doesn't matter about colour or pattern. We're not trying to lose anyone so it doesn't have to be all muted tones or camo. That said. Think of your colleague's eyes, we're the ones who will have to look at that neon Hawaiian monstrosity. Underwear. Socks. Wool sweater or fleece. Warmer wind proof jacket. Hat, gloves, scarf. Yeah. Really. Even if you only wear them on that really cold night I mentioned you'll be glad. Otherwise they're pillow stuffing. Two pairs of pants. (You read what I said about no denim, right?) Sunglasses and sun hat. Something to sleep in, silk long johns and long sleeved tops especially with a hood are nice but whatever. Decent footwear you have already broken in.

And finally, and I really mean this;

Waterproof jacket and trousers or rain kilt or full length poncho that will go over your rucksack. Don't piss around with some waxed effort. Something made for the job with decent ventilation. Because if it does rain for the whole two weeks you will really wish you'd paid attention to this bit.

Did I mention a rucksack? Rucksack. One that fits you with both a chest strap and a waist belt. Canvas looks nice but is heavy before it gets wet. Once it is wet? Why would you?

Expect to also carry food! We'll factor in re-supply but we'll be carrying high calorie food - we need about 5500 calories a day. Each. That's a lot of food. Most of it will be dehydrated. Water is heavy. I've already done a few food drops on our route. But you'll carry about six pounds of water and food for about ten days. Then we gradually eat down."

Frederick looks up at Jack.

"What the hell is a rain kilt? It sounds terrible. It all sounds terrible."

"If it keeps you dry, I'm not sure you're supposed to care what it looks like Frederick."

Frederick sniffs somewhat moodily.

“I suppose. Damn. I thought this would be a breeze. I mean. I walk. I go outdoors. I’ve read Bill Bryson. He even reminds us we need a rucksack. As if we didn’t know.”

Jack smiles.

“Didn’t Bryson’s friend want to try a delivery bag? Like paper boys and girls use?”

Fredrick twitches his nose.

“I am not an idiot.”

He looks up and sees Jack’s face.

“Oh all right. I can manage. I suppose. And yes yes he’s been very thorough. I can see these are all sensible. And we could all donate it after wards. If need be. Make it a thing.”

“Or you might decide you had such a great time you can’t wait to get back out there Fred. Take early retirement. Hike the Triple Crown.”

Frederick snorts.

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Will shuts the door of his pick-up with a decisive clunk and then comes round the front of the truck to the passenger side and opens the door. Wen looks up at him from where she is curled in the foot well in front of the seat.

“You staying or coming?”

She yawns. Cricks her jaw with it and then oozes out over the lip of the door. A sinuous ripple of fur. He slams the door after her and follows her up the steps where she settles down beside the open screen to wait for him. He stoops to lay down her packable water bowl and fill it from the covered tin jug Alana keeps outside the front entrance for exactly this purpose. Will isn’t her only customer who drops by with four legged friend in tow. Wen settles with a low rumble and sets to cleaning a paw before resting her head on both of them, crossed in front of her, lying sentinel. She looks relaxed, sleepy, only the occasional twitch of an ear betraying her alertness to her surroundings. Will eyes her fondly.

“You look like a shaggy Anubis.”

Wen blinks up at him. And he rolls his eyes at her. Yeah, yeah, she knows she’s a god.

Inside the store Alana Bloom wipes her hands on the back of her pants, drying them off. She steps round the counter smiles up at him.

“Will! Great. Your timing’s perfect. I’ve just had a delivery. Let me get the coffee going and we can go through your list.”

She pauses just for a moment and seems to decide something. Steps in a little closer and gives him a quick kiss on the cheek. Then steps back looking a little befuddled and surprised

and with the faintest flush in her cheek.

Ahh. Shit.

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Chapter End Notes

Folks, I'm one of those writers who has no problem self promoting on social media. But I'm terrible at asking others to do so, or tagging people when I post, I feel too embarrassed about it. I'm told I'm an idiot about this.

So. In the interests of being less of an idiot. If you'd be inclined to share, or reblog, or rec, I'd be delighted.

I've been encouraged (ouch my arm hurts) to post this at the bottom of all my current WIPs. So, I'm trying.

Thank you.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will raises his eyebrows at Alana and she shrugs her shoulders a little.

“I’ll put that coffee on.”

He sighs.

“Alana?”

“Sorry. Just. Trying it out. To see.”

He nods slowly. Watches her trying not to look at him. And decides to give her an out. If she needs it.

“Ok. Back to the delivery then?”

She nods keenly and fusses with the coffee machine.

“Yes. Right. Good. Most of it is the dry stuff. If it’s your usual then the perishables will come in three days before you head out. Is that ok?”

“Sure. That’s fine by me. I’ve a couple of unusual things.”

He hands her his scribbled list and she squints at it.

“I get it. Might have to order in specially. If it’s not in stock with the Verger’s. Might be a bit extra on the bill. Will that be ok? I can split it if it’s not.”

He shrugs some, Alana is good to her regulars. Even those whose credit is a little sketchy. It’s good psychology she says. Paying it forwards, who knows when it might come good at some unknown point in the future. And she’s exactly the kind who believes it will, some day.

“You’re all right. I’m good for it. Anyway, for the food bill, I’ll just pass it on direct to the customer. If they want to fuss I can always take something off.”

She smiles at him, sweet and wide eyed. The warmth is still there in her cheeks. He wonders if he has unintentionally been giving off some mixed signals. She’s one of the nicest people he knows, but, well, not to put too fine a point on it, she’s a Beta and that’s just not going to cut it. Not really.

“Everything all right here?”

He gestures vaguely round the store. She’s making a go of it. Bought from some yuppies who fancied themselves in mercantile out in the back of beyond. Their go at downshifting had

lasted one bad winter and one damp spring. She's made it through three winters and this will be her fourth full season. The store had been empty for a year between owners. Will and some of the other neighbours had helped her clean when she first arrived. He feels a kind of pride in what she has accomplished. Maybe that's what she's picked up on. He'll have to sort it out with her. But maybe he can work round to it.

They fall into an easy conversation and Will lets the tension dissipate, laughs at her comments, smiles at the customers who come through. Usually locals, people from hereabouts use her to order in from other bigger suppliers like Molson Verger, but she also gets a regular stream of thru-hikers and section-hikers too. Even this early in the spring there are people who feel called by the budding green light between the branches.

She waits until a pair of guys, mid twenties, fit looking, Betas or un-attached and un-bonded Alphas, have finished their careful selections. They're carrying small packs, light weight, expensive looking. But also well used. Maybe second hand off some ultralightweight message board, but maybe genuine regular walkers out here from some college for a few days. Both, she thinks. Maybe both. They laugh quietly with each other. Josh each other over the choices they make. One of them debates something then puts it back and then eventually circles round and goes back and picks up again. Alana smiles to see it's gummy bears. Gummy bears? Well. Why not.

She rings the total through the old manual till. And the final sum is clearly within their budget and they leave with a cheerful backwards glance. One of them throws a small grin towards Will. He smiles back, and the boy's friend nudges him once they're leaving the shop. She smiles down into the drawer of the till and snaps it closed with a ding.

"Are you dropping anything off to cache in advance?"

"I've planned for three. But I think one more. Maybe take a bear safe and hang it up at Rust Peak. Just some dry goods. Nothing fancy. Just to make the point."

She nods. She knows the place. She may not get out quite as much as she would like, but isn't that the way of things? When you're in the midst of something amazing it can be doubly hard to actually go out and look for yourself. But she's walked up Rust Peak. One of the false summits on Blood Mountain. Where you think you've made it but only crest the rise to realise there's another, steeper incline just ahead. The woods, the mountains, the weather, it can all feel as though it's conspiring against you. Whispering 'go back' at every turn. 'Go back. While you still can.' She likes to walk alone on well marked trails. But just sometimes, out there, up there, she's been glad of company. It feels. Well, she tries not to be fanciful about these things but just occasionally it feels haunted. Some of the locals had laughed at her when she'd commented, but Will, who she thinks probably knows these things, had just smiled and said 'why not?'

She shivers at the momentary memory of it.

"Have you met the group yet? The surgeons?"

She gestures at the coffee machine as if to check about a second cup and Will hands over his almost empty mug. Whilst she's making another round he leans on the counter top and tells

her about the recent visit from Jack Crawford and Frederick Chilton.

“What about the others then?”

“Later in the week.” He says. “Jack’s arranged for me to come in. Do an hours show and tell and answer any questions. Take the kit in with me, so they’ve got a real idea. Hey. Have any of them called you about gear? I put your contacts details on the suppliers list.”

She leans against the wall behind the counter.

“Just one of them. Matthew something. He seemed ok. Very clear about what he wanted, wanted to know about loaning and donating items. Asked after you.”

Will laughs, just a small huff of sound.

“Did he now? That’s smart of him. I’d want to know who was taking me off into the woods if I was in his no doubt sensible surgeon shoes. What did he want to know? You dig out a decent testimonial?”

She dips her head and laughs a little.

“Of course. I said I’d trust you out there over anyone else I know. Everyone else. Even if your squirrel stew ain’t worth shit.”

He laughs again. An unconsciously happy noise. Genuine. It suits him she thinks. Happy is a surprisingly good look on Will Graham.

“Hey! That was just the once. And anyway. Well. Thanks. I appreciate it.”

“Are you looking forwards to it?”

“The trip?” He considers for a moment. “Yes. I think so. But. Ask me again after I’ve met them all. At the same time. In the same room.”

“Taking Wen with you?”

“My big guns? Sadly no. The meet and greet is in the hospital. She’s not allowed in.”

Alana looks mournful.

“Shame. You’ll have to win them over on your own. Though I’m sure you’ll manage,”

She looks uncertain again. And Will feels a modicum of dismay.

“Alana. It’s ok. No harm done. What is it? Say what’s on your mind.”

“I met someone. I know. Sorry. I shouldn’t have.”

He laughs at her expression. And then he feels he has to explain.

“God. I’m not laughing at you. That’s great. Really. That’s just fantastic. I’m happy for you. So. What was the kiss for?”

“I’m a bit messed up about it.”

He smiles at her, she looks a little sad, and for sure, a little confused too. Then she laughs a bit. A small sound. Provisional. Will almost reaches out a hand, but holds back and softly asks.

“Come on. Talk to me. I know it’s not me? Never has been has it?”

“I don’t know, Louise Hobbs said...”

He laughs.

“God. Don’t listen to Garrett or Louise! And definitely not to Abigail! They know nothing! Certainly not about my love life. Truly.”

She seems to rally then.

“You’re right. I mean. No offence. You wear a plaid shirt exceptionally well. But just...”

“No fireworks?”

She smiles properly.

“Damp squibs.”

He looks at her and suddenly it all clicks into place.

“Wrong primary gender?”

“You did know.”

“Maybe. Deep down. I did wonder. Before.”

“About us? Oh. Oh dear. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. And really. You buried that lede.”

She makes a small face and scrunches her nose up whilst she thinks.

“Out here? Well. I think no one would really care. But. Well it’s more because of who she is rather than what she is.”

She frowns.

“That didn’t come out quite right. If I tell you who it is it will make more sense to you.”

It does.

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Randall tips his head to one side and considers the painting above the fireplace. He can see that it is well executed even if the subject matter leaves him a little cold. The allegories and myths of Classical Greece and Rome don't really do it for him. Ovid is not his homeboy. Is that a quote from some show? He thinks it might be. He knows he'll have to suck it up if anything with Hannibal is to go any further. Abel sidles in beside him, stands there looking at the painting, drinking from his glass.

"Leda and the Swan. Not your cup of tea then?"

Randall continues to study the picture, as though absorbed in a critical reflection of it.

"It's an original isn't it? Is there a story?"

Abel smiles and turns to look at the rest of the dining room. Its cobalt blue walls, the indoor herb garden, the ridiculously long table that he knows Mischa and Hannibal eat at even when they are not entertaining. All the carefully curated objects scattered around the room where they will provoke most attention and discussion. He thinks it's possible that Hannibal has a whole basement full of boxes labelled with the kind of impression the objets inside might create. He takes another generous mouthful from his aperitif glass.

"Boucher." He sees Randall's look. "The artist. Seized by some Nazi officer during the war. Must have fancied it adorning the walls of his own quarters. Or to impress someone higher up the tree. Hannibal's father got it back. Later on of course."

Randall nods.

"Their father's dead. Isn't he?"

Abel nods.

"It's why Hannibal inherited the title. His uncle's still alive though, younger of the two brothers, though even he's over ninety if you can credit it. His wife's dead too. But the Countess, well, I think she's called a dowager or something, she's still around. Survived the Nazis and the Communists. Promises to haunt her own castle when the time comes."

Randall turns to look at him properly. He looks faintly shocked.

"I knew about the title. Not about the castle."

Abel grins at him briefly.

"Oh yeah. There's a castle, ancient retainer, dungeons. The full works."

He smiles at the expression on Randall's face.

"Hey don't sweat it. You'd look good in crenellations."

Randall gives him a sardonic look.

“And there I was thinking the collar would do the trick. Don’t you?”

Abel laughs.

“They’re a very traditional family. Collars before they’re formally attached and bonded? Randal, you know their mother can trace her family line back before the Borgias. I think Machiavelli is some kind of relative. Perhaps traditional doesn’t even begin to cover the half of it.”

Randall nods and empties his own glass.

“You’ve met her? The old Countess?”

“Nope. I don’t expect to either. Not unless one of them commits, and honestly...”

He glances at Randall, looks him up and down, and then carefully looks elsewhere in the room, as if to bely the seriousness of his tone. Randall tries not to bristle defensively.

“Go on Abel. It’s not like you to hold back is it.”

Abel fiddles with the stem of his glass. Across the room Mischa catches his eye and smiles warmly at him. She turns back promptly to catch something Frederick is saying to her. It’s possible Fred blushes just slightly at her attention.

“In truth Randall, I’m not sure how she’d be about a non-traditional pairing. Not prejudice you understand. It’s more that there’s got to be someone to pass the castle, the title and all the rest of it on to. I’m not sure Alpha/Alpha is going to have her dancing in the aisles. And you’re not interested in Mischa are you?”

Randall looks across the room and then away quickly.

“She’s very beautiful.” He sighs and drops his gaze to the hardwood of the floor. “But you’re right. It’s Hannibal. I don’t think he’d see it as an obstacle. The Alpha thing.”

“You’re right. He wouldn’t. But he’s very level headed. And I don’t think he’d go for a secondary partner, no quiet little omega spouse in the background popping out heirs. Can you see it? And he’s no attachment to his name. So he’s either been exceptionally careful, or distant. Or both. That collar isn’t hiding anything. He’s waiting to make the right match.”

Randall looks at him.

“Hopeless then.”

“I’m not saying that. I’m just saying he’s not been sufficiently enamoured by anyone to become attached, let alone mated and bonded. And I don’t think passion would be his deciding factor in any relationship. I like him. He’s very entertaining. But he’s got family to think of. And a possessive streak a mile wide.”

Randall sighs.

“I know. But if Mischa was with someone. It could all change. If she had children?”

Abel waggles his head.

“Well. Yes. That’s true. It would free Hannibal up to make his own decisions.” He considers Randall. “I’m just saying not to get your hopes up. Even if he’s interested in a little romance. Well, he’s a romantic guy. Be careful Randall. Don’t risk your heart.”

He looks sadly into his empty glass.

“God. I’m being a miserable bastard. Look ignore me. You want it. You hit it. Why not. He’d knock you back if he wasn’t interested.”

Randall looks at him.

“You think the children thing really matters? He could have a second. If he wanted. Pair bond laws allow for it.”

Abel glances over to his wife, also an Alpha, currently talking to their host.

“Yes. Sure. They do. Look, I know the law’s on side. But really? Even if you were the primary. Would you want to be in a relationship with one part of an Alpha/Omega pair bond? Could you imagine Jack’s Bella standing for it? Not that Jack’s ever shown the slightest interest in another Omega, let alone a Beta or Alpha. But could you.”

“They don’t have children.”

“Not the point. They have that bond. An attachment is something. For sure. But a mated bond? That’s something else again.”

“Abel. And I realise this is a little personal. What about you? You don’t have children. Can’t.”

Abel holds up his hands.

“I am incredibly fortunate, and amazed, and delighted with what I have rather than angsting over what might never be. I am incredibly lucky that the person I loved, loved me right back. And yes. Both Alphas, so, even though the primary gender was aligned we always knew children wouldn’t be on the cards. We have been reconciled to that from the start. No regrets about it. None at all.”

He sounds definite. But Randall can’t help but wonder. He’s never been interested in potential offspring himself, but he knows it’s a deal breaker for some. Ah, well, he will cross that particular bridge if and when he comes to it. He smiles faintly at Abel, aware that this is the most he’s found out about his colleague in all the time they’ve known one another. They both turn when Hannibal claps his hands to draw the attention of the group and laughs.

“All right. All right. There have been no disasters in the kitchen this evening. Please everyone. Have a seat.”

There's a certain amount of milling around and smirking and good humour as Mischa and Hannibal orchestrate everyone into the best possible combination of seating partners. It's not quite perfect. Really they could do with another pair, but six is adequate. Randall smiles a small secretive little smirk down into his plate setting when Hannibal seats him to his right, his host taking the spot at the head of the table.

"Comfortable?"

Randall looks up and smiles warmly.

"Thank you. Yes."

With the table set and everything arranged Hannibal nods at him and then stands again and gives the assorted guests a fond look.

"No need to stand on ceremony. Please. Help yourself." He raises his glass in a small toast, and the gesture is echoed round the table. "Oh. And I should say, nothing here is vegetarian."

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Alana hovers by her phone. She wonders if she ought to call and apologise to Will. He'd been very nice about what had happened. But it had been very unfair of her. Though, if she thinks about it without letting the guilt wash away her good sense, she can see that he was rather relieved when she'd explained.

She goes into her galley kitchen and looks at the small bunch of flowers in the blue and white china jug on the windowsill. The jug was her grandmother's and is the perfect receptacle for the small bouquet. There's nothing especially fancy about them, more wildflowers and weeds than anything else. Something with bright spring colour. She reaches out a hand and softly touches one of the blossoms, it gives a little under her touch. On her finger tip there is just the faintest stain of yellow pollen.

She sighs. When Margot Verger gave her the flowers she'd felt as though her whole hand burned where she was touched. Her eyes don't show an attachment. They can't. She's just a Beta. But she wonders, if just maybe, Margot's eyes have changed. And, if so, what her father and brother have to say about that.

She dusts the pollen off. Takes a deep breath and goes back to the landline in the living room and dials.

She lets the phone ring out at the other end. She imagines the receiver there in the Verger's big entrance hall. Maybe the housekeeper is steadily walking towards it. She holds her breath a beat or two. And then puts the handset back in the cradle before anyone picks up. Not yet, she thinks. Not just yet.

.....

Will sits in his living room, his socked feet propped up on an old horse-hair stuffed leather pouffe his dad found in some flea-market. Once, some time ago, it had been a rich burgundy

colour with plaited gold braiding and tassels. Now? Well, now it's had several seams carefully repaired and the tassels removed after Wen had tried to eat them when she was still a puppy. It's just the right height. Past its glory days it still has purpose, and meaning.

Although Spring is in full session it's a little chilled in the evening. Will pulls an old crochet blanket off the back of the couch and drapes it over himself. It's just possible it's one his mom made. He never asked. He just appreciated it. And now there's no one left to ask. He blows out his cheeks. It is what it is.

In retrospect the thing with Alana is almost amusing. He lays his head back and looks up at the ceiling. He's not really predisposed to melancholy, just a little introspection now and again. Not really sad, just, considering. And just a little lonesome right now. A little itchy even, under his skin. Not the suppressants. Not some ghost heat his body is trying to persuade him to assuage. Just that human, all too human feeling of alone that wouldn't be countered by a crowded bar, or a trip to the theatre or any press of company. He wants, what does he want? He wants someone to know him. And, in turn, someone who wants to be known. He rolls his head to one side and then the other and looks round the room. It's a kind of comfort. His dad's stuff, some of it at least, is still interspersed with his own in places. It's not quite a shrine, just memory jogs, reminders. Mostly happy ones. Even if they carry a poignancy now.

He reaches across to a side table and picks up the book that's been sitting there the last few days. The marker hasn't really moved recently as he's been too busy with other stuff. Lucretius 'On the Nature Of the Universe.' He opens it and settles in to read. After a few pages he finds some pencilled notes he must have jotted down last time he read the book. He checks the front to see when that was. Five years ago. Longer than he would have thought. The pencilled month and year in the front is a habit he picked up from his dad, who got it from his father. Just for a moment he allows himself the possibility that one day he'll pass this innocent habit on to his own child.

He puts the marker back into the book. Sets it aside again. Closes his eyes. Maybe. Some time. But not yet.

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who did reblog or share. The story gained five new subscribers within the hour, which is a lovely thing for a writer.

Chapter 6

There's laughter and good coffee in the sitting room. The side lamps and a single corner standard lamp provide the lighting. They cast soft pools of light, gentling the shadows in the corners of the room. Randall thinks the lampshades might be some famous pattern, he's seen it before somewhere. French? English? Something like that. Maybe a postcard from some museum. It's the kind of thing his mother likes. Maybe she has a dish cloth with it printed on.

Mrs G hasn't quite eviscerated Frederick and he's looking mildly pleased with himself. So far he's held his own and has even had what he'd call a good time. He sighs a little to himself. A wistful kind of thing. He never has got the hang of this kind of socialising. But today has been ok. Mischa Lecter has been sweet. And Abel seems to have either bribed or coerced his wife into some kind of even temperament. He hasn't said something which has everyone either frowning or hiding a smile behind a glass, he's managed not to show off too much, nor try and upstage his host. In all. It's ok. He looks around the room. It's got some bold decorative choices. Old world he thinks. Maybe inherited furniture. There's an old gleam to the polish on some of the chairs. He wonders if they have cleaners or a housekeeper.

He inadvertently catches his host's eye. Hannibal smiles at him and then winks a little. Frederick manages a weak smile back. The trip won't be so bad he thinks. He's used to Randall and Abel is mostly an easy going kind of guy. And yes, Hannibal has been pleasant tonight and Mischa didn't try and flirt too much. It should be manageable. And then he can go home, curl up with a film, or some book, dress up a little, have a night out. Maybe buy a nice evening out somewhere. Even have a weekend away. With nothing that involves the hiss of nylon and interminable rain.

Randall takes the tray from Hannibal's hands.

"Here. Let me help. You grab the doors."

Hannibal smiles at him in mild amusement. Neither of them speak as they make their way through the house. In the kitchen he turns a burner on under a pot and lets the percolator run. From the corner of his eye he can see Randall frowning at the small print on the wall in the corner above the armchair. He watches as Randall takes a sliding step closer to the bookcase. It is mostly recipe books, gastronomic histories, foodie coffee table books, some travelogues with especially astute observations on cookery and street food. There is also a collection of his own notebooks-recipes, commentary, menus for dinner parties, guest lists, suppliers. Something he has kept up for upwards of 30 years. An endeavour he faintly thinks he might turn into a biography of food at some point. Some distant point. Randall touches the spine of one gently. He turns to look at Hannibal.

"May I?"

Hannibal nods and turns back to the coffee. Aware though that Randall is reading something perhaps rather intimate, in its own way. Randall drops into the chair and reads.

He doesn't read page after page, he just dips in here and there. Tasting. Hannibal smiles at his own fancifulness.

When the coffee is done he puts the finishing touches to the tray.

"Randall ? Shall we?"

The younger man looks up at him and smiles as he stands. He puts the notebook back in the right place. Something of which Hannibal approves. There's a pause. Then Randall steps across the room and stops just on the edge of what might be considered a polite distance from where Hannibal stands. Randall looks up into his face.

"Interesting reading. I can't think when you find the time."

"We should always make time for the things we find enriching."

Randall reaches out a hand and draws a finger down the lapel of the jacket Hannibal is wearing.

"You know. I think you're right." He pauses just for moment, letting his hand flatten across the flat plane of Hannibal's chest. "You going to kiss me now?"

Hannibal smiles, just very faintly.

"I might."

Randall actually laughs and leans forwards and up and places the briefest of kisses on Hannibal's lips.

"Enriching huh? Could be. Shall I get the doors this time."

Hannibal circles Randall's wrist before he has a chance to step away and is about to suggest perhaps a different course of action when they hear high heeled steps from the hallway coming towards the kitchen. They both take a small step apart. Randall blushes. Though they both turn to look at the doorway. Mischa eyes them a little cynically.

"You're supposed to just boil the water not grow the damn beans. What on Earth are you two up to?"

"Something like that. The beans I mean." He turns back to Hannibal and smiles a little, just a small thing, a sort of secret look. Shared between them. "I'm sure Mischa is good at doors too."

When he saunters from the room without a backwards glance Mischa turns to her brother and raises her eyebrows.

"Well?"

"Maybe if you hadn't interrupted."

“Oh. Sorry. I hadn’t thought..”

Hannibal picks up the tray.

“No, no. It’s quite all right. I’m not sure it’s a good idea anyway. Better not to start anything before this trip. Nothing worse than a burgeoning intimacy where nothing can be explored.”

Mischa snorts.

“Don’t be so cool about it Hannibal. If you were really interested I can’t imagine you’d let a few microns of tent between you and your colleagues worry you. Would you?”

“I’m not entirely sure I’d want all my romantic efforts critiqued by all my most immediate colleagues and friends.”

She has the gall to smirk at him.

“All right. No knotting in the woods. I understand.”

He looks mildly scandalised.

“Mischa! You shock me. I wouldn’t dream of it.”

.....

On their drive home Mrs G changes the radio station four times before she’s found something of which she approves. She turns in the passenger seat and regards her husband fondly.

“You spent a lot of time talking to Randall.”

Abel glances at her and then re-focuses on the road.

“I did. It was enlightening.”

She narrows her eyes at him.

“Tell me he isn’t making a play for one of the Lecters. He isn’t. Is he? Oh god. He is.”

Abel grins and casts another quick glance her way. Returns his eyes to the road. The street lights along this stretch are just slightly badly angled and tend to make him squint a little in the dazzle. The car is a smooth ride though and the annoying noise the clutch was making seems to have stopped now the weather is warmer. It’s perhaps a little irritating of him but he likes the stick shift even if it means he’s always the designated driver if they use his car of an evening.

“Why do you think that? Something you noticed? Or overheard. Did Hannibal say something?”

She makes a face.

“Nothing like that. But really. They’re both out of his league. I like Mischa. A lot. But she’s not going to roll over and bare her neck for some jumped up guy from the Midwest even if he is good in the operating theatre. Her mother wouldn’t stand for it. Even if he is an Alpha. I can’t see it.”

“And Hannibal?”

She considers this.
“He’s more complicated. Alpha/Alpha? Well I can’t see him intrinsically against it. Just from a sexuality point of view, he’s always seemed open to it, from what you and Mischa have said. But I think he’d be a tough nut to crack for anything more than an affair. Though Randall is very pretty. And Hannibal does like to be a little unconventional in his appetites. But.. No.. I don’t think so... I don’t really see it. I think Randall wants to play for keeps.”

“He’s the right age for it certainly. But you think no go. No slow burning fuse?”

She snorts a small noise.

“I don’t think so. If there is I don’t expect a big explosion at the end. More like a fizzle and pop.”

Abel laughs.

“We could dance at their wedding.”

“Only if I can have a new hat.”

She leans over and pats Abel on the knee.

“I’m right. You’ll see.”

.....

In the largest outdoors shop that Will recommended Matthew grins at his friend.

“He seemed ok on the phone. Quite serious about it. Smart guy. Maybe a little earnest. I quite liked him. Dry sense of humour I think. Fredrick might be a little scared of him.”

“Fred is scared of everyone. What did the friend have to say about this Dr Graham?”

“The woman? I don’t know if they’re friends exactly. Though she did say something about squirrel stew.”

Brian laughs and then looks faintly horrified.

“God. That’s barbaric. Damn. He won’t make you eat that. Will he?”

Matthew smiles and pulls out a rain jacket from the clothes rack he’s perusing.

“No idea. He didn’t say. I didn’t ask. What do you think of this one?”

Brian eyes the rain jacket.

“It looks ok. How heavy is it?”

Matthew hands over the coat and Brian weighs it assessingly in his hand.

“Heavy. If it doesn’t rain you’ll just have to carry it. Did you ask the kid at the desk?”

“I did. He was the one who pointed us in this direction. I don’t know. The woman suggested I should really be looking at garage gear.”

Brian pauses in pulling a pair of rain pants off another rail and holds them up critically.

“You’ll need these too. What the hell is garage gear?”

Matthew puts the jacket back and then looks at the pants and shakes his head.

“Like a mom and pop deal, but smaller. Makes gear for hikers and backpackers and lightweight enthusiasts. Incredible fabrics. A whole world I know nothing about. None of us do. I can’t imagine what Jack thought he was doing suggesting this.”

Brian smiles a little at his friend. Gives him a bit of a look. He’s heard plenty about Matthew’s boss since he took the job the previous year.

“I guess that’s kind of the point. None of you do. Outside your comfort zones. Depending on each other in new ways.” He smirks. “Bet you’re missing Philly right now.”

Matthew nods. Acknowledging the truth of it.

“I am. You’re right.” He sighs a little huff of noise. Just through his nose. “The thing with Hannibal annoyed me.” He stops for a moment. “Did I tell you some journalist is sniffing round? Asking about it.”

“I thought the patient survived!”

“They did. I’m not sure what the deal is. I think they just got wind of some fuck up. Maybe one of the nurses spoke out of turn.”

Brian sniffs.

“Fucking tabloid vultures and ambulance chasers.”

He flicks through some more hangers.

“You’ll get over it Matty. Bev says hi by the way. Jimmy too.”

“Yeah? Nice. Say hi back. We should all hang out when this thing is done. I’ll come over for the weekend? Yeah?”

“Sounds like a plan. So, ‘garage gear’. I guess we could google it.”

“I’ve got names. I’m way ahead of you. It’s just so..”

“Tedious? Dull? Boring?”

“It shouldn’t be. Some of it I’m almost looking forwards to. But you know. Shopping. Ugh.”

“Deathly.”

“You got it.”

“So why are we here? Use the internet for gods sake. Order in.”

Matthew looks at his friend. He’s right.

“Drink?”

“Now you’re talking. Garage gear. For fucks sake Matthew.”

.....

Bella Crawford reads the kit list her husband has left out in the kitchen table. She smiles. The annotation is hilarious as is the pile of stuff that’s been accumulating in a box in the hallway. Jack really likes to go all in with his pet projects. She’s always liked his focus and drive, his ambition, even if it can make him a little blinkered at times.

She looks up and smiles when he comes into the room and frowns at her with a quizzical expression.

“What’s got you?”

“Did you know you’ll have to share a tent? On the trip?”

“You saw that huh?”

“I did. So how are you going to swing that?”

“Yeah. Well. Ok. I thought about this but Will Graham says we draw names out of a hat. So that it’s random. We can either stick with that person for the whole two weeks or switch out each time we strike camp. We’ll be re-pitching almost every night. So either way is viable.”

She laughs at him again and he rolls his eyes.

“I know. I know. I’d kill not to have to share with Fred. But the others are ok. Or should be. Don’t you think?”

“Well I think Tobias would be fine. And with pretty well anyone. Maybe not Abel. They’re a bit too alike. I’d say, might bring out the catty in each other. Randall and Matthew would be good. You and Hannibal or Abel should be fine as well. You’d probably be all right with Matthew. Even Randall.” She pauses. “Jack, don’t put Randall with Hannibal. Or if you do, expect some fireworks.”

“Fireworks?”

“Oh yeah. I think so. Maybe! All that UST.”

“What UST? Randall and Hannibal? You’re kidding me? Aren’t you?”

She nods a little smugly at him.

“I’m not so sure about Hannibal. He’s been very buttoned up about it. But Randall! Definitely has a thing for Hannibal. The total hots.”

Jack eyes his wife, she’s got a good nose for these things. She was right about Tobias after all.

“You’ve seen them exactly once in the same room.”

She shrugs.

“Doesn’t matter. That was quite enough. You ask Abel. He’ll tell you. I think he knows. Matthew might know too. I’m not daft Jack.”

“But they’re both Alphas. Hannibal’s way too hidebound for that. Isn’t he?”

“You think? Well. Keep telling yourself that. Ok. Personally, I think our Mr Tier could throw it all into the ring in a big way for Dr Lecter.”

Jack makes a face.

“If you say so. Damn. I’ll ask Will if there’s any way to rig the draw.”

She smiles at him.

“Will is it now. What’s he like? You liked him didn’t you.”

“Quiet. Smart. Knows his stuff. He had some amazing things in his cabin. The woods around there are beautiful. Nice guy. He got the measure of me and Fred straight off I’d say. Wasn’t a shit about it though. Even when Fred was, well, Fred. You know how he can be.”

“I do. And I bet you end up with him for the whole two weeks.”

“If I do I’ll bribe the others to swop out with me. Gotta have a few perks.”

She laughs.

“Keep telling yourself that too. I’m going to get a start on dinner. When’s your Will coming in?”

“Few days time. He sent me the bill for the food order. You want to see it. Have another laugh at my expense.”

“Yes?” She crosses the kitchen and opens the refrigerator door and looks inside critically. Damn, one of them better do a shop of some kind soon. It seems to mainly be condiments stocked inside. “You want sausage casserole and potatoes? Because that’s what we’ve got.”

“Sure. Anything. Here look at it.”

He thrusts the cell phone towards her and she puts the sausages on the counter too and dries her hands on her jeans.

“Thanks.” As she reads it she smiles some more. “You’ve got to carry all this between you Jack? And your gear? You really want this don’t you?”

Jack frowns.

“Goddamit Bella, you are really harshing my buzz right now.”

She laughs as she passes the cell back to him and he grumbles as he swipes down the list again. Bulgar wheat? What the actual fuck?

.....
In their small kitchen Franklyn watches as Tobias makes himself a sandwich.

“You ok Tobes? Difficult day?”

Tobias doesn’t say anything for a moment, just carries on fixing his snack. He’s conscious of Franklyn tracking his movements with anxious eyes, to the sink, the fridge, back to the counter top. He comes and sits down beside his partner and leans a little into him.

“One of the juniors screwed up. It was touch and go for a bit. I’m sorry I’m so late.”

Franklyn draws his dressing gown around him a little closer. He’d been woken by the front door closing even if he knows Tobias would have tried to be as quiet as possible. Two a.m. is no one’s idea of a good time for a booty call when your alarm is set and you both get up at 7 a.m. on a normal day. And anyway Tobias is considerate. Careful. Thoughtful. Affectionate in a repressed upright kind of way. And Franklyn is just as devoted right back.

“Shall I make you something hot? There’s some leftovers I could heat up.”

Tobias shakes his head.

“It’s ok. I’m not really hungry. Just eating because I ought to. You ok. How was your day?”

“Oh well. The usual. Happy blend of neuroses, psychoses, and man I forgot to take my doses.”

Tobias laughs. Franklyn always manages to make him laugh. He’s sweet, and caring and apparently an excellent therapist. The children who make up the bulk of his practice certainly adore him. His waiting list is a mile long, he’s popular. Tobias can see why.

Tobias reaches out a hand and Franklyn takes it and kisses the back of it gently.

“Hey. I ran into Donald today. Sutcliffe. I got those things off the list you wanted. Anyway. He was in the same shop. Buying gaiters. Which, by the way, you should ask the guide about. We had coffee. He knows the place you’re going. He fishes up that way somewhere. Ok. Sorry. Long story short. He says he’s off on some trip up there end of the week I think. He’s got gear though that he said he can lend you? Says he’s got way too much, and it would be good to loan it out.”

Tobias smiles tiredly.

“That’s good. Thank you. He seem ok?”

Franklyn gently natters on about their friend until Tobias has finished eating his food. He gets up then and stacks the plate on the side of the sink with another few plates and a mug. He smiles at the mug. They bought it at Niagara Falls from some tacky tourist shop. His goal is to encourage Tobias to be a little less formal, live a little, let it all hang out some. Kitsch tourist mugs are as good a place as any to start.

“Come on. Leave this. I’ll tackle it in the morning.”

“Don’t you have an early?”

“In the evening then.”

“Bed?”

“Yeah. But you should totally have a shower first. You still smell of anaesthetic.”

Tobias smiles, it’s true. He probably does.

“Help me?”

Franklyn strokes his arm and smiles.

“Always.”

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Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will reads his email carefully. The local Parks and Rec warden sends round a newsletter once a month which updates on any issues that might be of concern or interest to locals who use the woods for whatever reason. The news about a newly arrived roving wolf pack in the district is of some concern. He drafts a quick email to Garrett and then gives Wen her breakfast whilst he spends a little longer on his own. A ping from his old laptop alerts him to an answer. Good. That's ok then.

A little later he is singing in his truck on the way to the Hobbs's house. Wendigo sits up on the back seat of the truck, nothing more really than a narrow padded bench across the back. She has her face pressed up against the partially open rear window, tongue lolling out. She doesn't join in his bad singing but nor does she howl so he counts that as a win.

When he gets to the Hobbs' place Wen follows him happily indoors. The news about the pack is sufficiently worrying that it's a better idea to check it out without having her along to worry about. Keeping her indoors for the day would be cruel. So the Hobbs' it is.

At least this year he has had advance notice of the pack circulating in the area. When they came around last season they dipped down into some of the human inhabited areas and that wasn't good for anyone, including the wolves.

Wen seems as happy as ever to be left to Abigail's tender mercies.

"Don't spoil her. No snacks. She'll just pester you all day otherwise."

Abigail makes a sort of teenager sound of toleration in response and Will simply gives her a look in return. She stands beside her mom and Wendigo on their porch as they wave him good bye.

Back in his own cabin Will packs the bear safe with some of the dried food the surgeon's team will want about half way through the trip; soup mix, dried potato, powdered peanut butter, couscous and a bottle of oil that's he's triple bagged. Partly because of spillage and partly to inhibit any lingering smell.

The walk up to the bald at Rust Peak should be maybe an eleven hour round trip. Just five out, five back and an hour or so to assess the site. It's a while since he's hiked that way, and it'd be good to see if anything very much has changed up there. He checks his belt pack; tarp, compass and map, mug and stove, stormproof lighter, space blanket, water and filter and a few packets of dried food that he can reconstitute just with boiling water. Strictly speaking he shouldn't really need any of it. Still it's good practice and he might fancy something to eat that's more than just the energy bars he's got secreted round the pack and his multiple pockets.

Given the recent rain he might encounter some delay or detour too, so, sensible all round to be ready for it. He's beyond the days when he might just head up into the hills and hope for the best; he's read Krakeur and all about Everett Ruess. He may be heading into the wild but he fully intends to come out again too. He remembers his knife from the draining board in the kitchen set down by the sink to dry out before he oils it. A screw came loose and he'd taken the opportunity to give it a good clean before putting it back together again. It takes less than a minute to work the mineral oil in, kept in a small can by the front door, useful for all kinds of things that stick, hinges, locks, the chain on a snowmobile or bicycle.

He fits the bear safe into its harness and pulls it on and then shuffles it around before it's seated and comfortable on his back over the waist pack. He does up the belt round his middle. Hmm. He might have put on a little weight since the last time he wore it. Winter padding his dad used to call it. Yeah. He'll have to watch for that. Easy to become spring padding and summer padding too.

At the front door he looks up through the space afforded by the clearing in the trees. He stands there for a few moments and listens. Orientates himself to the wild, closes his eyes for a moment. Savours it. He crinkles his nose. It's going to rain.

He ducks back inside and pulls a large rain poncho off a hook. It's not the lightest one he owns but it belonged to his dad and he's fond of it. He tucks it into the belt of the pack, loosening it a little further to accommodate the bulk of the heavy nylon and then closes and locks the front door of the cabin behind him.

The rain starts ninety minutes into his hike. It begins with just a patter in the leaves but turns torrential surprisingly quickly. He heads for a big spreading chestnut just off the path and leans close to the trunks under the canopy of branches and the budding leaves. He eats one of the energy bars stowed in a pocket and breathes in the smells and the splash of raindrops.

The rain throws up all the sharp scents of the wood. And though it is its own noise, it also quietens down other things. And makes other things more pronounced. He's seen wolf and bear scat on the way up. The bear's is old, dried out, probably from last year. The wolf's though is fresh. With any luck it is just the pack mentioned by the Warden, just having a scout around, on it's way through to better pickings, getting a feel for what the season might bring. He'll have to make sure the group remembers to bury any waste after they've burned it. Or pack it out if it won't rot or degrade. Won't do to attract any predators with the promise of an easy meal. Won't do at all. Bad for everyone.

It had been a bad year last year, lean, berries had been poor which in turn had a knock on effect all the way up the food chain. He'd found a few scavenged carcasses at the tail end of the winter, before the melt had really finished. Animals that had nearly made it through the long dark, but not quite.

The current pack has probably thinned out, maybe lost its oldest members. It's almost certainly hungry and a little mean in its habits.

He gives the rain another twenty minutes and then decides to brave it. The walk is quiet. Unremarkable. Except in the deep solace it brings him. He's careful underfoot especially on

one of the rocky scrabbly ledges he has to skirt before he goes deeper into a wooded section just on the edge of one of the small plateaus.

The grassy balds are a historic remnant. He bemoans the local ranger policy of letting them grow back to wilderness, but knows nothing he says will impact national strategic direction for the Parks and Reserves. The balds have their own kind of beauty and are an almost forgotten legacy of the settlements hereabouts from a hundred years ago or more; the flora and fauna are quite different here, meadow rather than true wood, lovely in the spring and autumn. He smiles to himself, yeah, he's a tough mountain man who loves the spring flowers. Up here on this summit there are moss covered remains of a barn and cabin and a falling down outhouse built up against the edge of the clearing.

It's here that he's made a cache and where he will hang the bear safe.

The end of the rope he's brought with him has a monkey's fist knot tied into it and weighted in the centre with a hag stone just to give it some decent ballast. Once the rope is up and over the branch he's used several times before he hauls the safe up well above the reach of even the most adventurous bear black or brown. They are both up here though he's only seen the rump end of a brown shambling off along a path, constructed by a local trail confederacy and used by all the local wildlife. Black bears though? Yeah. Much more common up here. He's seen more than a few. No close encounters. Unless you count just one in an abandoned cabin. Though that was more him getting out of there as fast as possible before the bear realised what was in front of her.

He ties the rope off. He'll make sure the doctors get a good chance at getting the safe up and down. See if they can get the rope over in less than five attempts. He's practised plenty to make it look easy. Just a swing and a hitch upwards. A lot of practise. Still if any of them have sailed that will be useful experience too. So. Well who knows. If Matthew Brown is from Philly he might have rowed on the Schuykill River at least.

It's strange up in the woods without Wen alongside. He comes up very occasionally without her, but he's got used to simply being able to drop a hand down to his side and run his fingers through her fur. Still if the wolf pack is around and being testy and hungry and unpredictable it's better to either keep her out of the way or keep her on a leash. Neither option has proved much fun for either of them in the past.

After he has hung the safe he ties off his tarp so that he has a small sheltered area in the lee of the cabin. There's really just one corner still intact. Partly because the stone built chimney is still standing. He wonders sometimes where the rocks to build it came from. All the rest of the cabin must have been wood and has mostly rotted away now. But someone brought rock from somewhere. Smoothed off boulders, smaller than his head, but larger than his fist. They must have been hauled here. Maybe the river, but that's a long way below. A good few hours round trip. The chimney and fire place represent a huge investment in time and effort and commitment, to this land and this place in particular. What happens to the people who lived here he wonders. Where did they go. Why did they abandon their homestead? When? He knows Alana said it felt haunted up here. Maybe that's so.

It's always stuck him as quirky that people still use the fireplace. Several times he's found the remains of a cook fire long cold but used. The corner he's covered over protects him and his

small stove from the rain. Still coming down hard, though perhaps not as dense as earlier. The angled tarp slung over the ends of the rotten roof joists draining the water off on the other side of half fallen wall. The stone he is sat on is a little damp but the poncho is long enough to cover his arse and sit on. He sits there patiently waiting for the water to boil in the stove, his knees up to his chin.

Hot chicken soup, even if it is just from a powder is somehow comforting. The slightly chemical taste sits on his tongue like a memory. Hospitals. That last place where his dad stayed. Before he came home. That drinks machine in the waiting room.

Will swills out the dregs in his mug onto the ground and sets the stove going again just to re-heat the water to make a little sweet chocolate. The rain is just staring to ease and there's an accompanying chill rising like a mist from the ground.

He lets his mind empty and wander. Listens. Blackbird. Something else, from the thrush family. A corvidae. There's a raven family up here somewhere. An offshoot of the ones down in the valley. He hasn't seen this pair yet, just heard them. But that's not what he's hearing now. Something else.

In the grass near his feet there's a mouse. If he stays real still other things will come out. Creeping. Mentally he reviews what time it is. He should get going soon. The rain has slowed him down. If he wants to make it home before the light gives out he needs to get a move on.

He sighs. Next time he's up here it will be with the surgeons and they'll be making a whole lot more noise. Like this it's peaceful. Restorative even. Maybe he can persuade them to use a sit spot. Spend fifteen minutes just listening, smelling, looking, paying attention. He remembers he didn't put a note book and pen on the kit list. He better mention that at the check in. He pulls out a small waterproof notebook from a shirt pocket and jots it down. Just as a reminder. Perhaps some of them will bring a camera or a journal. He should suggest that. Or a sketch pad if any of them fancy themselves at drawing.

He makes a start on packing still wondering about the bird he can hear. He's usually good with bird song and calls but this isn't one he knows. When it comes to taking the tarp down he pauses and debates whether to leave it. The chances of anyone disturbing it are slim, and if everything goes according to plan they'll all be up here in about ten days time depending on how they manage. And depending somewhat on the weather.

The tarp is not especially heavy but he's already got a list as long as both arms of all the gear he needs to bring for the group let alone his own kit. It's marked with his name and contact details. He debates. It stays.

The walk down, like the walk up, is uneventful. He takes it slowly. It's slippery now in places. Walking poles, he thinks, they could all do with walking poles. They'd be good for all of them, even those with younger and more flexible knees.

Some people find a walk in the woods monotonous. Trees, trees, and more trees. An endless cacophony of green. Everything blurring together. It's not soothing Will thinks, but it can be meditative. He read somewhere that it can afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted. It can make you think. Or at least it can give you the space to do so. Out on the water, deep in

the woods, they've both provided him the same opportunities for real life. Some of the best things that have ever happened to him have happened out of doors. Unmediated.

The last few hours he pays close attention to the state of the trails closer to civilisation. They tend to show more wear, more litter. There's no big car park near by but people still get dropped off and walk into the woods from the roadside. Some of them stop after twenty minutes and then turn straight back round again and come back out. He can't say he blames them. The woods are not to everyone's taste even if they seem pretty on some national geographic show. Some of the trails get well used, but only some of them, and only some of the time. They won't be following the white blazes of the Appalachian Trail during their own trip but they'll cross it once. And there's a chance they'll encounter someone on one of the side trials they'll be using.

He guesses that Jack Crawford would like it to be a true wilderness, whatever that means nowadays, but this is as close as he's going to get. They'll be fortunate to get away from the sound of tyres on tarmac and light pollution obliterating the stars. That may well prove to be enough wilderness for the group when it comes down to it. And if they run into a troop of Boy Scouts then so be it. Actually that would be quite funny. Maybe he should ask around, talk to Garrett, see if he's got any groups planned the next few weeks.

.....

Abel eyes his colleague as they stand side by side at the sink and scrub their hands. Hannibal drops his face mask into the hamper and then peels off his cap and overalls and they follow close behind. He washes his hands again. At the adjacent sink Abel does the same.

"Good job."

"Straightforwards after all."

"It only looks easy because you've done it countless times."

"Countless is probably true. Thank you Abel, a fine assist."

"You're welcome. I think we make a good team all told."

Hannibal nods. Dries his hands carefully and then puts the paper towel into the waste. He steps over to his locker and enters the combination in the electronic keypad. From inside he removes a clean shirt and his collar. He moves to a mirror and laces the dark velvet band. His well practised fingers making short work of the eyes and ribbon. Abel smiles.

"Did they have to persuade you take it off in the theatre."

Hannibal turns from the mirror and looks at him. He finishes the last hook and adjusts the collar minutely.

"The collar? No it hadn't occurred to me to protest when I first began."

"And if you're bonded? What do the Uber traditionalists do?"

Hannibal frowns.

“Probably not go into surgical fields. I imagine my mother would have something to say about it. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her bonding mark uncovered. Nor my father’s either for that matter.”

Abel smiles at him.

“So? Given it any thought?”

Hannibal gives him an assessing look.

“Some thing you’d like to share with the class Mr Gideon?”

“No. You’re all right. Mostly I’m just teasing. I’m sure you’ve noticed our Mr Tier making a play.”

Hannibal finishes buttoning his shirt and adds cuff links before responding.

“I may have noticed. He’s been fairly candid about his interest.”

“And?”

Hannibal pulls a jacket from its hanger in his locker. He smooths it on and flicks some lint from a sleeve. He glances at Abel.

“I’m not prevaricating... Well, only a little. I’m considering how best to respond. I would say that it does not seem exactly propitious right at this moment.”

“Yeah? Oh. Because of the woods thing?” He pulls on his own cardigan and then a sports jacket on top. “Fair enough. Gives you a chance to see him at his best and worst too.” He grins, perhaps a little evilly. “And give him a chance to get over his own infatuation if you do something idiotic.”

“You think he’d be deterred by a little mud?”

“I think he’s holding a torch for you but he hasn’t let it illuminate any faults you may have.”

“Faults Abel? I can’t think what you mean!”

Abel shakes his heads and laughs at the smirk on Hannibal’s face.

“Careful Hannibal, you’re in danger of believing your own mythos! You ready for tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow? Oh. The meeting. Yes I believe so. Are we meant to bring anything. I admit I didn’t give Jack’s memo my full attention.”

“Notepad and pen, something to take notes on anyway. And yourself.”

“I imagine that will be more than enough. Still it should give Mr Graham a chance to look at us all en famille as it were.”

“Dr Graham. He’s a PhD. It’s on the sheet.”

Hannibal shrugs “Of course. You’re quite right. Probably more qualified than any of us.”

Abel laughs again “Out there? I sincerely hope so. I’m hoping he’s as much an expert as Jack says. Might even be a nice change. Someone else with all the responsibility.”

“Really? Do you think so?”

Abel sighs. “Honestly? I think I might be dreading every minute of it. You ready to go? Got time for a drink?”

Hannibal heads out of the locker room just ahead of his colleague.

“Sadly not. I’m going to the opera. Another time.”

“God Hannibal. The opera. Wait. You’re not going with Randall are you. He said something about Orfeo. Are you? Hannibal? Wait up!”

He hurries after his colleague.

.....

In the morning Jack casts a somewhat critical and possibly mournful eye around the room. Will Graham has already been and gone twice and has set up gear all over the long conference table down the centre of the room.

On a side console table there is what might be described as a breakfast buffet, if you were feeling generous about it. He wonders if up in the hills he would be willing to kill for even a sniff of a plastic packaged muffin with a synthetic blueberry taste.

Fred and Abel at least are on time. Early even. And stock up on pastries and coffee. When Hannibal arrives he joins them and the three men gaze at the gear with varying degrees of troubled expressions. They cluster and talk desultorily, perhaps occasionally staring at something particularly worrisome. What is that.. that.. thing? They drift along the table towards the far end as a tight knot of bemusement.

Randall and Tobias arrive at the same time, Will close behind. He makes his way promptly to where Jack is standing on the far side of the room, and puts a box on a chair.

“Ok? I promise this is the last lot. Oh. Good the tech set up the AV. Great. Thanks.”

“There’s coffee if you like. I should introduce you as well. Before we get started.”

“Sure, why not. Let me grab a cup.”

He smiles at Jack who accompanies him to the selection, now looking slightly picked over. They smile perhaps conspiratorially at the awful range of options. Matthew joins them and Jack makes the most of the opportunity to distract from the breakfast.

“You’re not late. We’re a bit ahead. Matthew, this is Will Graham. Will this is Matthew Brown, he joined us from Philly last year, I think I said.”

Will switches his mug around and shakes hands. Matthews grip is firm but not excessive. Perhaps he’s careful with that Will thinks. Perhaps they all are. He makes a mental note not to do anything that might risk their justifiably precious surgeon’s hands. He smiles a little.

“Nice to put a face to a name Mr Brown. How is the garage gear hunt going? Alana said you called.”

Matthew makes a small self deprecatory noise as he fixes his drink.

“Yeah. Did she. I’ve made a start. I had a long and very involved conversation with some guy who frankly spoke a whole other language. And I thought we were obscure! Anyway we had a lot of stopping and starting. I’ve got questions, so many questions.”

He laughs to soften the complaint. And Will smiles at him.

“I’ve got a whole half hour for questions, I hope we’ll get to them then. Would that be Ok? The others would probably find them useful.”

Jack reaches between them for the last cinnamon bun and shifts over a little when Randall joins them to re-fill his cup.

“Just by a process of elimination, you’ve got to be the person we’re trusting to bring us back alive. You lost anyone yet?”

Will blinks at him. It occurs to him just how awful it would be to throw the question back at him given the line of work these guys are all in. But that would be terrible, so he manages to hold back on the snarky comment that rises to his lips. Instead he shakes the guy’s hand, and smiles as if it had been meant as a joke.

“Not yet. Hopefully this will be no different. So, I’m Will, you are?”

The man doesn’t quite flick his eyes up and down Will but it’s a close run thing and Will forces himself not to bristle, though that too is hard. This could be trouble. Maybe. Of one of several kinds. He catches the guy flick his eyes sideways to the group at the far end of the room, one of the men with his back to them. He thinks he gets it then. Shit, that’s a complication to the relationship dynamics that the group could do without. Oh well. He’s navigated hordes of newly presented teenagers, he can handle a small group with some kind of something going on in the background. Because there’s something going on in those dark eyes. It’s just possible it’s a new thing, or an uncertain thing, or something that isn’t really a thing yet at all. Could be any of those. He’ll have to quiz Jack later about it, find out who the object of this guy’s attentions are. If it’s not obvious after this session.

Jack glances at his watch and those in his immediate vicinity get the not so subtle hint and move purposefully to the chairs lined up round the table. Will juggles his muffin and coffee and manages to not drop either.

“I’ll just introduce the others quickly.” He nudges Will along the side of the room. “Will this is Abel Gideon. Fred you’ve already met, and our visiting fellow Hannibal Lecter.”

Will smiles at Chilton, nods a hello, Fred smiles back looking slightly smug and pleased with himself. Glad to be on the inside of things for once. Abel catches the muffin that Will almost drops as they manage to shake hands round it. There might be an “Oopsie.” In there which somehow makes Will warm to Abel straight off. And having managed not to throw coffee on anyone, himself included, yes to small triumphs he thinks, he finally looks up properly into the face of the man who had previously had his back to the room.

And.

Oh.

Oh. Absolute fucking fuck shit damn fuck. Fuck.

Oh.

That’s not good at all.

.....

Chapter End Notes

Ch 8 coming as soon as I’ve finished typing it up! I won’t make you wait too long.

Chapter 8

Hannibal realises that his hands are shaking and that he has clasped the other man's hand between his own. He can't bring himself to let go. His eyes widen as he realises that the other man, Will, Will Graham is similarly affected. Trying hard to maintain eye contact like any reasonable person could. Trying to maintain a sensible pressure though his fingers. Hannibal does not feel reasonable or sensible. Not in the slightest. And dear god he hasn't let go.

Will's fingers, caught between the doctor's feel like they might be on fire. He sees the frozen desperate look on Hannibal's face. Maybe surprise. Or shock. Terror even. Will sees his nostrils flare and a look of confusion spread all the way across it and which is chased then by something else. Something wild. Yearning.

Will realises they've neither of them let go and he tries to release his fingers. Hannibal's grip tightens for a moment, but he manages something like a smile and drops his hands. Neither of them manage to speak.

Shit. Will thinks. Shit. What the actual fuck?

Nobody else seems to have noticed anything too untoward and Jack shepherds him to the end of the room and then catches everyone's attention. Will risks a glance at Hannibal as he seats himself next to Abel Gideon. He looks stunned. As though everything he thought he knew has been proved wrong in an instant. Jack seems oblivious as he makes a start. Will swallows, not entirely sure he can trust his voice just yet.

"So." Announces Jack. "A week from now this coffee will be only a fond memory. And you'll wish you'd eaten that Danish. We've done the rounds of introductions I think, so I'll hand straight over to Will. Dr Graham, we're in your more than capable hands. Thank you."

Will takes a deep breath. He's got this. It's fine. His whole world hasn't just turned entirely upside down. A walk in the park. Woods. Whatever.

Fuck.

.....

Hannibal watches and listens as Will Graham takes them through an interesting and clearly well thought through patter. He talks of the activities they'll undertake, the gear they'll come to depend on, what they might like to think about in advance, a few things that got left off the kit list that they might want.

He pays as much attention as he can muster, but the words he hears are as though his head were beneath water, submerged, and each sound muffled. What just happened. Something startling. Unique. Nothing he has ever known. How can they all simply sit there as though everything hasn't tilted on its axis.

He looks round at the others and Randall sitting opposite him, next to Matthew, catches his eye and smiles a little. Out of instinct and habit more than anything more he smiles back. Randall settles more smugly into his chair. Hannibal swivels his eyes to look at the others. Frederick is frowning. No surprise there. Tobias looks restrained but interested, thoughtful. Not unusual for him. Matthew is taking lots of notes and smiling at something that Will has said. Will. Will. He realises he is frowning at the close attention Matthew is paying their guide.

Oh. This slow creeping awareness brings him back to himself. Not entirely. But the sounds in the room coalesce into words, the words into sentences, and the sentences gradually into some semblance of sense. He takes a deep breath. As though resuscitated. He shall have to pay careful attention to his behaviour. He glances at Will and then at Abel sitting beside him. Abel returns the look and gives him a long drawn out slow wink.

Ahhh.

The table splits into two groups at Will's direction and they watch and make notes on the AV presentation he's prepared. The collection of photos, guest vlogs, and short film clips show various groups and individuals in the landscape they will shortly encounter. It finishes with a shot of Will's cabin and an older man sitting on the porch steps, an arm round Will and the other round a wolf cub in his lap.

"She's called Wendigo. Wen for short. Not a full wolf. She's seven now. Jack said none of you have allergies. She'll be coming with us upaways. She knows her stuff."

His voice falters just for a moment as they all look at the picture. He doesn't mention the older man.

They spend half an hour on questions first in groups and then as one. Will answers everything patiently and confidently. He manages a smooth wrap up and almost jumps on Matthew's offer to help take things out to the truck when they're done. Tobias offers an extra pair of arms whilst Hannibal is still trying to parse his wits and an appropriate response to the situation.

He's prevented by Jack, intent on a discussion with him and Abel about the rota for the next few days. Hannibal can't help the pang he feels as he watches Tobias and Matthew leave, both laden down with gear, close behind Will.

Randall waits for Hannibal and Abel to finish up with their boss and waylays Hannibal with a few asides about the presentation and what did he think of the visuals, and the questions, and far too many things Hannibal wants to pay no mind to. He holds on to a civil tongue with as much grace as he can muster. Abel gives him a look of such sardonic wit that he has to resist the temptation to shove him, as though they had returned to kindergarten.

.....

In the car park Matthew and Tobias help Will load everything into the back of the pick-up truck. When he closes it up Matthew turns to carry on the conversation about gear. But he

stops suddenly, makes a noise of considerable irritation at something he's seen across the car park.

"Shit. That stupid woman. She better not be.... sorry. Journalist. I have to go and sort this out now. Will, I'm sorry. I'll call you. Ok."

He rushes straight towards the red haired woman, his hands clenched into fists down by his sides. She turns her long lens camera towards him and is clearly taking shot after shot of his enraged advance.

Will turns a surprised look to Tobias who sighs and shrugs and maybe even rolls his eyes a little.

"Comes with the territory I'm afraid. Even if you don't actually make a mistake. Just part of the job these days."

He tails off and Will looks at him with some sympathy.

"I got it. I'm sorry. That can't be easy. You can't save everyone. No matter how good you are. I'm sorry about the harassment."

Tobias examines his shoes and shifts uncomfortably.

"It's getting worse. Makes people reluctant to train. Now everyone wants to cash in on someone else's misery. Ahh well. Two weeks away from the likes of Ms Lounds won't be a bad thing."

He looks up and smiles.

"My partner said we should invite you round for supper before we go. He worries. I think he wants to reassure himself. If you've time and it wouldn't be inconvenient, could we manage that do you think. He's a therapist. Likes to confront his fears head on."

Will smiles at him.

"Sure. I should think so. Can you give me your card. Or you could email. You've got my details. Would that be ok?"

Tobias looks considerably relieved and almost reaches out and pats Will on the arm.

"Thank you. That's very helpful. I think if he could he'd come with us, just to be sure I was all right."

Will looks into the worried single ringed eyes of the man.

"I think that's real nice." He says quietly. "Of course I can try and answer any questions he has. Of course I can. Try and put his mind at rest."

Will watches as Tobias walks steadily away. Something more at ease in the set of his shoulders. He crosses the car park and Will sees him go back to the hospital's main entrance

and disappear inside.

Will shakes his head and looks round to see if Matthew is still arguing with the journalist but there's no sign of him. She though is standing leaning against a small sporty SUV speaking into what might be recorder or a cell. She speaks with animation and what looks like amusement. Will makes an effort to not feel too much about her. He finds it a little easy to get pulled into other's dramas. He's an empathetic guy. It can make him a little vulnerable if he's not careful. A sucker for a stray or a sob story. He unlocks and opens the driver's door of his truck and gets in.

When he's sat down he realises that the adrenaline of the morning is dissipating. And Goddamit it's with a trembling hand that he inserts the key into the ignition. He wipes his hands on the pants legs of his khakis. Damn. The actual shakes. The gradual recession of the stress of the moment leaves him feeling drained, maybe a little anxious. Or desperate. Or something.

What the actual hell was that? He leans forwards in his seat and rests his forehead on the steering wheel and then gently bangs his head against it. Ah. Shit. So screwed. So goddam utterly, royally, totally screwed.

He nearly jumps out of his skin when someone knocks on the driver's door window. He peers up through the fan of his eyelashes and sees Hannibal looking down at him through the glass. Yup. Really and truly, madly, deeply screwed.

.....

"Will?"

Will takes a deep breath and winds down the window, manual hand crank and all.

"Dr Lecter. How can I help?"

Hannibal raises his eyebrows and Will makes a sort of nod of acquiescence and winds the window back up again. Hannibal steps back so that Will can get out of the pick-up. For a few moments the car door is between them, and they simply look at each other.

Slowly, as though telegraphing every intent, Hannibal closes the truck door. Will fights to get his heart rate under control. It's as though he's just run up Blood Mountain along the steep trail from his home. He can only hope that Hannibal is similarly afflicted, as the blood roaring in his ears makes it impossible to hear anything Hannibal might be saying

Hannibal steps closer. For sure there isn't much room between the parked vehicles, but the lack of space doesn't warrant the way he crowds against Will. He places just one hand on his shoulder, looks at Will seriously, with just the faintest hint of something approaching wonder in his eyes. He leans, just a fraction forwards, and Will moves his head back, just a little, perhaps in hesitation, or bafflement. Then his eyes soften and something around the corners of his mouth suggest a tentative smile, an acceptance, an acknowledgement. He lifts his face as Hannibal drops his.

As first kisses go it begins just as a simple taste. A press of lips. Perhaps an enquiry. But Hannibal moves his hand from Will's shoulder to cradle his jaw, his other hand dropping to the small of Will's back, splaying there, pulling him tighter against him. Their mouths adjust against one another and when Hannibal makes an urgent, fretful noise Will opens his mouth and if he'd had any thought of holding back that's forgotten now. He brings his own hands to Hannibal's back. Slides one up to the nape of his neck, holding him in place as he excavates his mouth with his tongue, licking and sucking and lipping his way. A thorough exploration of the possibilities. His other hand ends up grasped tightly round the lapels of Hannibal's jacket, bunching them together.

They only part when they're both breathless. Will looks wrecked, eyes dark, a warm and hectic flush across his cheeks. Hannibal's mouth is bitten red and wet. I did that, Will thinks, I did that and I'll do it again.

Hannibal though is ahead of him as he pulls Will even tighter against him and then pushes him purposefully up against the side of the pick-up. He gets both of his hands round the side of Will's face, tightens his shoulders inwards, and practically devours Will's mouth, questing, enjoying, demanding. Will decides he doesn't care about the noises he makes even when they're the result of the friction Hannibal causes when he presses a thigh hard between Will's legs.

"Fuck." He pants desperately. "Please. God. It's a car park."

Hannibal ignores him, continues to nip at his bottom lip, suck it between his teeth, nibble, and Will squirms and wonders just how rude it would be to simply wrap his legs around the good doctor and let himself be virtually dry humped against the truck. God. He can feel it rocking under their impact already. He can't say he especially cares. It'd be a good way to go.

Hannibal takes a breath and pulls back for a moment.

"I'm sorry. That may have been impetuous."

Will laughs and dips his head in for a kiss where he licks his way into Hannibal's mouth, god he tastes good, like the sea, like darkness, like the first frost of autumn, as he pulls back Hannibal chases it and almost growls when he is frustrated in his efforts. Will makes a soft huff of a laugh.

"Do you hear me complaining? Though honestly. Car Park. Your place of work? Just saying."

Hannibal shifts his attention to the corner of Will's jaw and bites the delicate flesh just there, below his ear. Softly. Only a promise of something sharper. Will tilts his head and lets him. Makes a noise which even he can tell is incredibly indecent.

It makes them both laugh.

Hannibal lets him down off the side of the truck, just a little.

"You're right. Though I can't say I'm especially regretful. In fact. Not at all."

He attempts to school his expression into something a little calmer. He's not at all sure he manages it in the slightest.

"We should talk about this. Please. Not here. Will you come home with me?"

Will blinks up at him. Slightly loosens the death grip his hand has on Hannibal's jacket.

"Don't you have people to operate on. You know. To save. A job to do?"

"I'm not on shift this afternoon or evening. Please. I'd like to make you lunch. Talk properly. This is not my usual.."

He stops. Will understands. It's not his usual either. His eyes glitter when he looks into Hannibal's face, sees the enchantment and delight there, because this is almost too good to be true.

Hannibal leans in yet again and kisses him further. It's sweeter and gentler this time and is redolent of long banked fires and simple yearning. Will brings a tender hand to Hannibal's face. Runs a thumb over the sharp plane of his cheekbone.

"It's ok. Really. Of course I will. Of course. Give me the address and the GPS. I'll follow you. Which is your car?"

He manages not to snort in amusement when Hannibal indicates his car. A large dark coloured Bentley, maybe midnight blue or wine red. The kind that looks black in the moonlight. He might smirk just a little though. Not too much.

"Spacious? Good ride is it?"

Hannibal narrows his eyes.

"Are you teasing me?"

Will flashes a fast grin at him.

"It's not impossible."

Hannibal looks momentarily non-plussed and then delighted. And then he's kissing him again. And Will wonders how much it would take for Hannibal to realise he's an Omega because damn this is making him a little wet already and he can feel the hot swell of Hannibal pressed hard against his groin.

"Fuck. Hannibal. Still. A. Car. Park."

Hannibal pulls back and is breathing so hard and looks so aroused it's all Will can do not to whine in desperation and grab him. He runs a visibly shaking hand through his hair.

"Take me home. Feed me. Talk to me. Before we do something that'll end up on the security CCTV and then all over social media."

Reluctantly they pull apart. Resisting, just about, the lure of each other. Hannibal manages another deep breath or two, straightens his jacket. Will resists the temptation to reach out and smooth down his hair. It would only escalate. And he thinks it's possible that they're both at the limits of their restraint. He feels out of control. Very close to an edge it would be all too easy to push them both over.

"Go on, I'll follow you. How far is it?"

"Approximately half an hour. At this time of day."

He closes his eyes for a moment and Will can appreciate the monumental effort Hannibal extends to pull himself together. He draws calm down over his face like a human veil, puts on something resembling a person suit. Steadies. He opens his eyes.

"You are very distracting."

Will gives him a gentle shove.

"Don't be distracted. Drive carefully. Half an hour. I'll catch you up."

He tries not to watch as Hannibal walks away from him across to where he is parked. He tries very hard not to laugh too when he sees the stiff legged-ness of his gait. Yeah. He thinks. He did that too. He shifts, a little physically uncomfortable as well. Eases the stretch of his pants at his groin.

When Hannibal reaches his car he looks up for a moment and raises a hand which Will acknowledges with a short wave in reply. Hannibal opens his car door and disappears into the depths of the Bentley. Will gets into his truck. The keys are still in the ignition. He looks at his hands. Slightly trembly still.

Really and truly fucked.

But maybe in a good way.

Just maybe.

.....

Abel knocks on the door to Jack's office.

"Got a minute?"

A little wearily Jack beckons him in, indicates one of the low seats across from his desk.

"Problem? Is it the rota because I'm not sure if.." he sees the look on Abel's face. "Not the rota. What's got you all bothered Abe?"

"Did you notice anything during the session?"

Jack sticks his bottom lip out, shakes his head a little, raises his eyebrows.

“I don’t think so. The coffee was about as shit as ever. I finally found out what the hell a dry bag is and why cuben is better but six times more expensive than sil-nylon. And how stupid a rain kilt really looks. Why? What?”

“Hannibal.”

Jack makes a go on gesture with his hand and Abel blows out his cheeks and closes his eyes for a moment. He opens them again. Jack sighs.

“Cut the melodramatics Abel. You’re not built for them. What happened. Someone say something. Is it Randall? Cos Goddamit... I’m not having..”

“Not Randall. Though god knows that could get nasty. Probably will do. Damn. Hannibal will have to talk to him. No. Not Randall. It’d be easier if it was. I’m talking about Will Graham.”

“Will? What about Will. I thought he did a fine job. Everyone seems to like him. What? What’s that face for?”

“Ok. You didn’t see it. Maybe no one else spotted it. Will. Hannibal. Instant. An attachment. Probably a full one. If their eyes haven’t turned by this time tomorrow I’ll eat my surgeon’s cap.”

Jack’s mouth drops open a little.

“But that hardly ever.. I mean. Like that? It’s only Alpha and Omega pairs. Will Graham isn’t an Omega. He’s a...”

He stops again.

“Actually I have no idea what the fuck he is. I’d have said Beta. Maybe Alpha. But Omega? Forgive my crudity but he doesn’t smell like a goddam Omega.”

Abel shrugs.

“Three percent of the population don’t smell like anything. You know that Jack. Anyone can be a non-secretor. Means he could pass as what ever he wants. No one any the wiser. Why wouldn’t he? It’s better for Omegas now. But male ones? Still not easy.”

Jack rubs his hands over his face and frowns.

“Damn. Do you think Hannibal realised? Did you speak to him?”

“Dashed off. Probably trying to figure out what the fuck just happened. You know what it’s like Jack. You and Bella?”

Jack goggles a bit.

“I walked round Florence in a total daze for three days. Couldn’t hardly think straight. Felt like I was burning up inside. But you’ve an attachment. What about you Abel?”

“Not the same. Alpha Alpha? Even I felt poleaxed. But if it is, if he is, I expect they’re both feeling a little crazy right now. Maybe more than a little. And I honestly don’t know how this might impact the trip.”

They look at each other for a few minutes. The seconds stretching between them as they both attempt to parse the possible consequences of a sudden attachment between the two men.

“Hannibal’s a consummate professional. Will Graham too. They’ll find a way to make it work. Sort something out. Talk to each other. We won’t find them desperately fucking up against some tree.”

Abel eyes his boss.

“Yeah? Good luck with that. If it’s that strong an attachment, it could drive him into rut. Even if Will is using suppressants, which, God I really hope he is.”

Jack nods.

“Talk to Hannibal. You know him better than I do. We won’t say anything to the others. Let Will Graham keep his privacy. It might be nothing. I’m not outing him as an omega only to have him and Hannibal just shake hands and part ways in a month’s time. None of the others need know. It’s not their business. He might not even be one. Lets keep it between Will and Hannibal. Ok?”

“Sure. And Randall? I’m sure you’ve noticed. How do you think that’s going to play out? He was already giving Will the old stink eye.”

“Was he? Astute of him. That’s between him and Hannibal. We should stay out of it as far as possible. All right. Nudge Hannibal. And the rest is between us.”

“Your call Jack. But we should be ready. I think there’s going to be trouble.”

Jack slowly lowers his head into his hands and groans.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Possibly just very slightly nsfw. But only slightly.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Matthew leans heavily against the door of his and Randall's office. He gently thumps the jamb.

"That woman! God. If her body turns up in some dumpster you better make sure you give me an alibi."

His colleague laughs.

"Who can you mean? You look, I don't know. Very, very, I think Hannibal would say distrait. Wait. Not Freddie Lounds? I'm sorry. I shouldn't joke about it." He sits up from where he has been lounging and swivelling in his chair. "She is a shit of the first water."

Matthew punches the door softly. Again.

"I don't even know what that means. But I get the idea." He slumps into the room and sits on the edge of his desk. Gripping it with his fingertips.

"It's worse than Philly. I had no idea. They don't put that in the brochure. How do you stand it?"

Randall fiddles with a pencil on his desk. He puts it down and then straightens it against the line of the blotter. Parallel.

"She's always gone after the big guns. The seniors. I guess I've just flown under her radar so far. You and Hannibal though? She'd probably see you as fair game. Both of you newbies and all. Both of you take a good photo. What's not to like. You're kind of perfect. Couldn't have painted a better target on your backs. Abel just laughs at her. She's got too much sense to go after Jack. And, well, there's no reason you'd know this but Tobias' Franklyn took a restraining order out against her. Something about his patient confidentiality and safety. She published his office and their home address."

Matthew looks at him in considerable surprise.

"Wow. I had no idea. That's why she didn't come over and talk to us. Damn. I should have left her alone."

“Oh yeah? Oh. Did you see her just now? Downstairs. You did didn’t you. Is that where Hannibal rushed off to? He said he had to see about something urgent.”

“Hannibal? No. I was helping Will stow his gear. Lounds was lurking. In the car park. I might have shouted a bit.”

“Well good for you. And don’t think I didn’t notice it’s all ‘Will’ now.”

Matthew shoots him a look.

“Why not? I liked him. And he’s not attached. So. You know. It’s a free country.”

Randall smirks and rocks back in his chair, puts his hands behind his head.

“Like that curly hair thing. Those intelligent spectacles. The cut of his jib.”

He watches as Matthew shrugs and then slips off his desk and circles it to sit in his own chair.

“Yeah. So what. I thought he was attractive. Interesting. He’s got good hands.”

“So you noticed that. So. Going to make a play for him? Got plenty of time on the trip. A dalliance in the woods.”

Matthew narrows his eyes at his colleague.

“You’re a fine one to talk. And how was the opera last night Mr Tier? Have a good time did we? Box seats and all?”

Randall sits upright again.

“The Opera was dire. Hannibal said the performances were first rate but you know? Not really my scene. God. Classical music and classical myths. Can’t think of a worse combination. But he was sweet.”

“Take you home did he?”

Randall sighs.

“If you must know. We parted ways after the curtains dropped. I thinks he’s concerned about starting something when we’re about to be in the middle of nowhere for a fortnight. Exposing ourselves to too much scrutiny. Much better to explore our intimacies in private.”

“He said that didn’t he? I can just hear him. God Randall. Are you really sure? I mean. Yeah. He fills those suits well. And I’ve seen him in the pool a few times. But, won’t you be bored out of your mind? I mean. Though if the sex blows your mind you won’t have to use it for anything else.”

His colleague frowns.

“Look. I know I was kind of joking at the start. But. I like him. I like him a lot. I think it could really work. I know our tastes don’t exactly align. But we’ve a lot in common. Don’t you think?”

“I think you’re over investing. But what do I know. I’m talking about giving our guide a good seeing to. He looks like he’d be down and dirty don’t you think? All that plaid and those fitted khaki pants.”

He makes a rough cupping and squeezing gesture with his hands in the air, Randall laughs again, the seriousness slowly easing off his face.

“God. Have you got a lumberjack kink? You have haven’t you. God. You’re ridiculous. Do you think he’s a Beta or just a flimsy Alpha?”

Matthew shrugs.

“Don’t know. Don’t really care. As long as he likes a knot we’ll be fine.”

“What if he wants to give you one?”

Matthew grins, an especially salacious smirk, and winks.

“Even better.”

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Will pulls up outside the somewhat imposing house. Of course Hannibal lives somewhere like this. The Bentley should have clued him in. This is just. Well. Somewhere on the up side of ostentation. He rubs his slightly sweaty palms on the legs of his pants. He switches off the engine. And takes a few deep breaths. Ok. Damn. He can feel his heart start to do the whole increased rate thing. His breathing might have speeded up too. He can feel a flush spreading in his cheeks. Damn. Could he look any more like a needy Omega? He clenches his hands a few times.

Hannibal’s car is already in the driveway so he parks just opposite the house on the street. He gets out, closes the door, locks it and tries to pull himself together. Talk. They’re going to talk. Hannibal is going to make him lunch. And they’re going to have a thorough conversation about what just happened. As he walks up the short path by the driveway Hannibal opens the front door and waits for him. Yeah, Will thinks, they’re just going to have a nice talk. And then maybe Hannibal is going to take him apart. He flashes onto the briefest mental image of sitting astride Hannibal, knotted and desperate to come all over his Alpha. Oh yeah. He’s got this for sure. No problem. Nothing to see here. Move along quickly.

“Will?”

And god, the smoke in the man’s voice makes him wetter.

Inside the lobby he hands Hannibal his jacket, who smiles, is a perfect host and hangs it in the small armoire off to one side. An armoire, Will thinks. Though he knows it’s an armoire so what does that say about him? Hannibal is about to say something when Will wraps his

arms round his neck and kisses him urgently. It's as good as it was in the car park. Better. They both moan into each other's mouths. Hannibal clasps him round the arse and practically lifts him from his feet. Will wraps one leg round him. Then bites Hannibal's bottom lip. Not enough to draw blood but enough for it to sting. God the noise that Hannibal makes is fantastic, so he does it again.

"Will. God. Will."

"What? You want to talk?"

Hannibal mouths urgently down the side of Will's neck and sucks at the base of his throat. Over the bonding gland. Residual in Betas but oh so active in Alphas and Omegas. It tingles.

"No. I want to take you to bed. Find out what else your mouth is good for."

"Yeah? God. Do that again. Fuck."

Hannibal does lift him then, but only carries him into the adjacent dining room and sits him on the table. Will flashes a look at him, all dark eyes and promise.

"I like the allegory. Am I just lunch. Or maybe dinner too?"

Hannibal pushes him back until he's flat on the table and sucks harder over Will's bonding gland. He nuzzles into the junction of Will's throat and neck.

"And every meal hereafter." He licks the side of Will's neck. "Why can't I scent you? My olfactory sense is very attuned."

"Non-secretor. The kids all think it's my super-power."

"The kids? You have children?"

Will laughs and pushes Hannibal up so that he's sitting with just a hand behind him supporting him, the other grasped gently over Hannibal's throat, over the collar.

"Maybe we should talk. Though honestly I'm hoping the bed thing isn't just talk."

Hannibal pulls back and then smiles and takes Will's hand and pulls him off the table.

"It won't be. But we should. Talk I mean. And eat. Come into the kitchen. I'll make us something."

Will holds onto Hannibal's hand, he looks down at where they're clasped, their fingers entangled. He gently tugs until Hannibal has stopped moving away from him.

"What is it? Will?"

Will holds up their joined hands.

"This is how it's going to be. Isn't it?"

“Conjoined? Yes. Yes I think it is.”

He pulls Will closer to him and noses into his hair.

“I may not be able to scent you. But you smell like home.”

Will laughs and pulls back.

“That’s the most romantic thing anyone has ever said to me.”

Hannibal’s face softens.

“I find myself rather pleased. Come. Kitchen.”

Will let’s himself be pulled along. Smiles with pleasure at the order of the room with its softly gleaming surfaces. A double larder fridge to one side. What might be a door to a pantry to the other.

“Oh. This is nice. Ok. I like your kitchen.”

Hannibal is amused and lets go of Will’s hand to go and consider the larder.

“Anything you don’t eat?”

“I’m pretty easy. Whatever’s convenient. But tasty. I like tasty.”

“I think we can manage that.”

He turns to see Will tilt his head as he reads the titles on the shelves of cookery books. Sees him spot the notebooks. Will turns to look at him.

“You keep records don’t you? What are they? The food you eat? Menus? What guests said? It matters to you? Food?”

Hannibal nods. He finds himself both gratified and somewhat moved to have been understood so quickly.

“It does. There are some things that matter to me considerably. Food amongst them.”

Will lifts his head and looks across the room at him.

“Good. Some things should matter. Should hold meaning for us.”

He glances around.

“I won’t guess. We’ve got plenty of time to find out about each other. There are some things we already know.”

Hannibal raises both his eyebrows. He takes his handful of items from the fridge over to a counter where he sets up a chopping board. He selects a paring knife from a rack. Sets to work chopping.

“Go on. I’m interested. What do we know?”

Will splays both hands, like a gesture of offering. Gift giving.

“We both carry our expertise with us. Having what we need around us is something that’s important to us. We both like to feel useful, be useful. We like looking after others. We probably both don’t let others do enough looking after of us. We have very specific specialisms, that we have a specialism at all means we have focus. Commitment. We’re good at being committed to things. Probably people too. We’re reflective, like to make sense of things. Fit things together. We find pleasure in things that are external to us, but which we both internalise. Find richness in that process. I said I wouldn’t guess. But I’d imagine you’re sensory. And you see value in nurturing and nourishing those senses.”

He stops. Shifts his shoulders a little. Maybe even shrugs.

“Am I close?”

Hannibal had already paused in what he was doing. Now he lays down his knife and comes round the side of the counter and stands next to Will. Searching his face.

“More than you can possibly know.”

Will nods.

“Good.”

They look at each other.

“What is this? What’s happening here?”

Hannibal reaches for him and pulls him into a tight embrace. One hand clutched in Will’s hair, the other at his waist. Will holds him just as close, in his arms. Strokes Hannibal’s back.

“I don’t know. I’ve only heard of it in stories. One or two couples I know. My parents. An instant and irrevocable knowledge of the other. A complete attraction.”

“A full attachment?”

“A soulbond.”

“You want that?”

Hannibal pulls back and looks into his eyes, a smile hovering on his lips.

“More than anything.”

Will nods.

“Then, that’s good. Isn’t it. That we’re here.”

“You too?”

“Yes. God. A thousand times yes.”

“Even with everything we don’t yet know?”

“Don’t you think we know enough?”

Hannibal laughs.

“I hope to know everything.”

“You will. I promise you. You will.”

Hannibal smiles and kisses him on the forehead.

“Lunch.”

“I’ll just sit over here.” He indicates the low armchair. Thinks about Hannibal seated in it, looking up. Will leaning over him, feeding him his cock. Hannibal’s perfect mouth stretched round him. He refocuses on what Hannibal is saying.

“And smoulder at me?”

He’s pleased with the delighted laugh this elicits.

“Is that what I’m doing? Great. Sure. I’ll sit in your comfy chair while you do all the hard work. I won’t ask what it is. Spoils the surprise.”

Hannibal looks at him again and smiles.

“Tell me something. Ask me something.”

Will nods.

“This is the talk bit. Right? Before the lunch bit? And then the bed bit?”

He grins when he sees just a spot of colour illuminate Hannibal’s cheek bones.

“You’re appalling. But yes. Broadly speaking.”

“Good. Ok. Tell me about the collar. I’m guessing that’s a family thing?”

Hannibal flashes a grateful glance at him.

“It is. Once presented. My parents, well, just my mother now, are somewhat traditional.” He pauses, and looks up. “Would that be an issue for you?”

“A collar? No. I get it. Family matters. Something else we have in common. Got any in sea green. I look good in sea green?”

“We’d have them made. My mother, along with being a traditionalist has views about these things. No family Will?”

“Nope. You saw the picture of my dad. He died. Year ago. Total shit storm, I miss him like crazy. My mom’s been gone a while. No siblings. Your dad’s gone? You close?”

“We were. Longer ago than yours. I’m sorry you’ve been alone.”

Will shrugs. A sad set to his demeanour. A settling of sorrow.

“It is what it is. So. Collar, bespoke. Should I borrow one until you can get one made. Do I get a set? To match the occasion. I can see the sartorial possibilities. I think I need one in plaid. What else? Children?”

Hannibal wonders if he is being teased again, but he smiles at the question. So disarmingly light in tone and deep in intent. Well he can give as good as gets.

“None. Oh, do you mean do I want them? Well. As you rightly said. Family is important, to me. So I’m open to it.” He pauses several beats and Will watches him consider his next reply. “I’m obfuscating.” He looks up and watches Will watching him. Something in his eyes. He sets down his knife again. Speaks quietly. “I very much want children.” He sees Will smile. “You?” He waits until Will nods. Then picks up his knife again.

They carry on in this vein. Opening themselves up to the other. Discovering. When Hannibal has finished preparing the meal they sit beside one another at the counter using some high stools. Occasionally reaching between them to clasp the other’s wrist or hand, mostly in acknowledgment at something known or understood between them, this growing attraction. Just once Hannibal squeezes Will’s thigh before Will in turn lightly smacks the back of his hand causing Hannibal to sputter and Will to laugh at him.

“Lunch is great. I’m eating this now. I’ll eat you later. Ok. Opera? Really? Have you seen the Orfeo? I went last week.”

“You’re teasing me.”

“I’m really not. Why. You think I wouldn’t like opera? I’m not just about the trees. Ok. I’m mostly about the trees. But sure. When I was in college I volunteered as an usher. Only way I could afford it. Fantastic. Saw some amazing productions.” He smiles at Hannibal’s expression. “This is good by the way. Duck? I’m a fan of game. Actually I could get you all the game and fish you could use. I already know you like to cook for people? Is that a big thing? Regular?”

Hannibal finishes his plateful and sets his knife and fork together.

“We normally eat next door. Yes. Regular. Smaller dinners and suppers, larger ones more occasionally.”

“I’m good with a knife. I can chop. Good with squirrel too.”

“I’ve eaten fox. And hedgehog. When I was a child.”

Will laughs.

“I’m not going to be able to shock you with my culinary adventures then. Good.”

Hannibal reaches out a hand and clasps Will’s.

“Will?”

Will uses his napkin to wipe the corner of his mouth, as if to say, look at me, I’m all civilised. I can meet your opera friends. He smirks though. Knowingly. Hannibal slowly smiles. Will watches as his expression turns predatory. He pushes up off his own stool and then moves along the table and lets Hannibal push his own seat back.

He sits himself down, astride Hannibal’s thighs. Has to push himself up to make the height. It’s not the most comfortable he’s ever been. But nor is what he’s about to say.

“There’s something I haven’t told you. That you may not realise. And I appreciate that it might not even matter. That whatever this is, isn’t because of it.”

He looks into Hannibal’s face.

“You don’t know do you? Well. You might know. Somewhere deep down. Where such things are inscribed into the core of our selves.”

He smiles at his own prose. But then he leans in and down and kisses Hannibal. So gently. So longingly. With as much passion and intention as he can manage. His voice roughens and deepens.

“When we go upstairs. Yes. And you show me your fine bed.” He kisses Hannibal again. “And, I sincerely hope, lay me out on it and mark me as yours. When you fuck me. God. And knot me. When I push you into rut. Maybe not today. But soon.” He licks a long stripe up Hannibal’s jaw. “God you taste good” he manages. Hannibal groans. Closes his eyes. “When you bite me and bond me. When our eyes change. When we go beyond an attachment, and everything we are begins to blur. When all that happens.” He takes a deep breath and waits for Hannibal to look at him again. “Some part of that will be because I’m an Omega.”

He waits to see Hannibal’s expression shift. It does. Just minutely. From something entirely desirous of him to something with a hint of covetousness and possessiveness too. It makes Will even wetter to see it. He feels a slip of slick gathering, he imagines the noise Hannibal might make if he tasted him. Licked into him. Sucked from the centre of him.

“Omega.”

Will nods.

“Yup. Jackpot.”

Hannibal’s mouth twitches. The look he gives Will is incendiary. He manages a light tone though.

“I should probably do some of that. As you just described. Shouldn’t I?”

“Definitely.” He pauses. “All right?”

Hannibal takes a breath, kisses him lightly. Shudders.

“Very. Up?”

Will laughs and stands. Hannibal stands too and gently pushes him towards the dining room. And then they both hear the front door open.

“Hannibal?”

Hannibal smiles at Will and kisses him again. Quickly. Takes a deep breath. Will almost sees him shake himself.

“In here. Kitchen.”

A tall woman with pale brown hair comes into the kitchen.

“The traffic is awful. Is there any lunch. Did you eat the duck. Oh. Hello?”

Hannibal smiles and holds out a hand to the woman and then pulls her in close to his side and kisses her hair.

“My darling.”

She turns and looks at Will and raises an eyebrow. He can see she’s wearing a collar. Fuck. Similar to Hannibal’s. What is this? He hardly knows what to do with himself. Fuck. He just outed himself. And now this. What is this? More importantly, who?

“I’m Mischa Lecter. I don’t think we’ve met.”

She holds out a hand which Will numbly takes and shakes. Mischa Lecter. Oh god. She’s an Omega. He can just catch a scent of it. Probably because of the awful traffic.

“This is Will Graham, Mischa. The guide?”

She turns back to Will and laughs.

“Oh yes. I read the list. Most entertaining. I’ve made a start on packing. Hannibal’s hopeless. But we’ll get there. Hannibal, please, for the love of god. Food?”

“My love. Of course. Will. I’m so sorry. Mischa doesn’t always make it home for lunch. I wasn’t expecting her. How long do you have?”

She glances at her watch.

“I think about an hour. Will. Can I show you what I’ve put together? It’s in the living room.”

Will feels dazed. Of course she wasn’t expected he thinks savagely. He glances back at Hannibal who smiles affectionately at them both.

“Good. I wanted you to meet. I hadn’t imagined it would be so soon. You’ve caught us a little unprepared. Ten minutes Mischa?”

“Fabulous. Will? I’ll show you. Try not to laugh.”

Will follows her out of the kitchen, glancing back once at Hannibal who has returned to the counter top and is clearing away their plates. Fuck. He thinks. Fuck. Is this? What is this?

Mischa is saying something to him as they cross the lobby into the living room.

“Here. I’ve made a pile of stuff. Crossed them off the list. Hannibal says we can borrow it. I admit I haven’t called anyone yet. We’ve both been a bit busy. But three of the others came for dinner on Saturday. You’ve met them all now? Yes? Hannibal said you were going in?”

Will nods. Up on the wall, above the fireplace is a large portrait that dominates the room. A traditional marriage portrait. Hannibal stands behind Mischa, one hand on her shoulder close to her neck, with just a thumb over her collar.

She follows his gaze.

“Lovely isn’t it. Gosh. Ten years ago. Nearly. I think we’re ageing well. Don’t you?”

She laughs and he dumbly nods. Just about manages to say.

“It’s a good likeness.”

“Yes? Some cousin I think? The painter. Hannibal knows. He pays attention to these things. Family. You can have too much of a good thing. So. List?”

She looks at him properly.

“Oh. Are you all right. You look a little unwell. I’m so sorry. Blathering on.”

“I’m. I’m not sure. I don’t feel.. have you got a downstairs bathroom?”

“Yes of course. Let me show you. I’m so sorry. Was it something you ate?”

She ushers him into the hall and into a small bathroom just off to one side. He closes the door and quickly splashes water on his face. Fuck. Fuck. God. Why didn’t Hannibal say? Why didn’t he ask? God. Maybe she can’t have children. Maybe Hannibal is open to a secondary partner. God. Maybe he’d make her a second. Fuck. This is beyond terrible. Of all the things. Damn. Damn. At least he didn’t. They didn’t. But fuck. How can he get out of this? He tries hard to calm himself. Stares at himself in the small mirror above the sink. Imagines the glass cracking, shards falling into darkness below. He closes his eyes. He really might be sick. Oh god. That terrible feeling of want and hope and love. Fuck it. Oh God. Love. God. Ok. Ok. He can manage this he can. He has to.

He flushes the handle and then washes his hands again. Blots his face on a hand towel and carefully rehangs it.

In the hallway Mischa goddamn Lecter is waiting for him, an anxious expression on her face.

“Are you feeling any better. I’m so sorry.. I should get Hannibal.”

“No. Don’t worry. I’m ok. Must be something from earlier. Stupid of me. Look. Give him my apologies. I can manage. Really.”

He opens the armoire and pulls his jacket from inside and clasps it to him. Mischa hovers and then opens the front door.

“Yes of course. Are you sure. I’m so sorry. We’ll meet again I’m certain. Under better circumstances.”

He nods and tries to smile and then he is out of the house and down the driveway. He just remembers to look as he crosses the road, unlocks and then yanks the truck door open. Gets in. Slams the door. Fumbles with his seat belt. Gets the key in the ignition, checks his mirrors, all on autopilot, and then pulls out and accelerates along the road. He doesn’t look in the rear view mirror. Fuck. He can feel the absolute fury building. How dare he. The bastard.

In the house Mischa slowly closes the front door. And crosses the lobby to the dining room and into the kitchen.

Hannibal looks up at her. Smiles.

“What did you do with Will?”

She frowns at him.

“I don’t know. Something happened. He wasn’t feeling well. He might have been sick in the bathroom.”

Hannibal drops his spoon. Turns off the burner under the saucepan.

“Is he all right? Where is he? You didn’t leave him?”

She shakes her head rapidly.

“No of course not. He left. He apologised. Hannibal. What on earth just happened? Hannibal?”

She sees the look of horror and something akin to terror on his face as he takes a step forward and leans hard against the counter top. He goes white. She wonders for a moment if he’s going to faint. Steps forward to him.

“Hannibal!”

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Chapter End Notes

Typing up as fast as I can....

Chapter 10

Will just about manages to get his temper under control, drives for another five miles and then pulls into a truck stop. He heads for the small trailer over in one corner of the lot that's selling tea and coffee out of a hatch and waits in line to buy a cup. The woman behind the counter flirts easily and lazily and really it's an antidote. It brings him sharply back to himself. Out of the haze of the last few hours.

"You take cream with that honey?"

"A little. Thanks. Can I get a Hershey's?"

She turns and reaches for the small bars of chocolate. He grins his thanks, ponies up some change to pay and then heads back over to his truck were he leans against the hood. He won't lean against the door. He won't. Nope. Too piercing a memory, too sharp an image in his mindscape.

He tears the corner of the chocolate bar wrapper with his teeth. It snags and rips awkwardly. He rests his styrofoam cup on the hood beside him and gets the bar the rest of the way open. Picks up his cup in his other hand. He can see where his finger nails have left tiny crescent moons in the foam, he's clutched it so hard and grimly.

He drinks his cup, eventually swilling the dregs around at the bottom, hoping they won't be too bitter. He finishes the chocolate bar. A soft slime of sweetness. A sharp contrast to the coffee. He looks around for somewhere to dump his trash but gives up and eventually slings it in the well in front of the passenger seat of the truck.

He swings round the rear of the truck. And then pulls open the driver's door and gets in. Ok. He knows where he's going. He's about to start up when someone knocks on his window. He rolls it down. At least it's not Hannibal fuck off Lecter this time.

"Yup?"

He's amazed to see the red-haired woman from before. But he can play dumb like the best of them.

"Do I know you?"

She smiles. And it reminds him of all the worst saccharine and artificial sweeteners he's ever eaten in his life. And that's a not inconsiderable number of variations.

"I'll admit I was following you. Saw you with Lecter. Something bad happened there..? He leaves a trail of broken people behind him. You're just another in a long line. A very long line. Care to comment?"

He's about to say something sharp and to the point when he remembers she's an ambulance chaser, someone who makes a living making people miserable.

"I don't think I know what you mean."

"He a friend of yours? Looked like it from where I was standing."

Will can't think how to reply. So she smirks at him, digs a card out of her purse. Regards him with half a smile. Not a very nice one he thinks. Then she leans into the car and pops it in his jacket's top pocket.

"Let me know if you've got anything you want to share. I bet he pays real well."

Will opens his mouth to correct her. Not even entirely sure what she means. If she's just trying to get a response. Say something, anything. But she just pats the window sill, smirks.

"Be seeing you. Around."

She saunters away and Will realises that all the good the coffee, and the chocolate and the just not thinking about how much his heart hurts has done has been erased. God. What did she mean? Broken people. God. What if he's not the first person Hannibal has drawn in. Attracted. Maybe he and his wife are playing some nasty game. He feels a terrible desperate breaking. God. Could he have been so wrong.

He takes another deep breath and tries to right himself. Ok. He needs to get home. Collect Wen from the Hobbs' place. Get out.

He starts the truck again.

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Mischa draws Hannibal by the hand to the comfortable armchair in front of the bookcase.

"Darling. Sit here." She crouches down beside him. Holding his hand and stroking it. He leans his head against the back of the chair. "What happened?" He asks, his voice hoarse and tired.

Her eyes widen and she shifts to sitting on the floor at his feet, looking up at him.

"I honestly don't know. We were having a perfectly pleasant conversation. I was talking about the kit I'd found. We talked about the picture. I think I mentioned that Anthony painted it. Then I realised he wasn't looking very well. I asked him if he was all right. Then I showed him where the downstairs washroom is. He came out looking even worse. Said he was sorry. To apologise to you. And that he should go. Nothing else."

Hannibal watches her face carefully, but he simply cannot understand it.

"Hannibal? What happened. Why are you so upset?"

He sighs. And god it's an awful thing to hear. Drawn out and painful.

“We have an attachment. Possibly a soulbond. It was instant.”

She makes an ‘Oh’ face. Her eyes as round as her mouth.

“Like mama and papa. Oh Hannibal.”

She starts to smile and then realises that of course, in this particular moment this is not a good thing. Well. It might be. But not right this second. Though it’s incredibly exciting for him.

“Did he realise? Maybe he was in shock? Do you think he...”

She stops. Everything is conjecture and guesswork. She makes a sad face.

“You have to talk to him. Hannibal. You must.”

Hannibal lifts his head from the back of the chair and levels a sobering look at her.”

“I don’t think I can. He left Mischa. He left. When we had told each other the secrets of our hearts. He just left.”

She frowns at him.

“He must have had a reason. You have to talk to him. Please. If it is a soulbond and you ignore it. Well. Hannibal. Please. Don’t do that to yourself.”

He slumps into the chair and then leans and puts his head in his hands. She suddenly realises he is weeping.

“Hannibal. Oh god. My dearest brother. Oh. God. Shall I call mother? Would that help. No. Probably not. She’d just demand your rights. Oh god. Hannibal. What dynamic is he? If it’s a soulbond. Oh god. Is he Omega? Hannibal? Oh my god.”

She puts her arms around him and lets him sob into her shoulder. She has never seen her brother this unmade by any situation or circumstance. She doesn’t know whether to feel furious or heartbroken on his behalf.

.....

Outside the Hobbs’ cabin Will pulls out his cell. He glances up to see if anyone has noticed his arrival and to his ongoing chagrin he Google’s ‘Mischa Lecter’. Almost instantly there are hits. Oh. PhD. Oh. Sabbatical at Georgetown. Oh. Picture of her with Hannibal at some charity thing. Some concert thing. An art gallery. He clicks onto the image search and then has to turn it off. He remembers Jack saying they’d only been here a few months but they’re all over the society pages. Dr and Dr Lecter. God. He looks up and sees Louise Hobbs at the front door, wiping her hands on a dish towel. He turns of his cell and viciously shoves it into the glove compartment.

Louise Hobbs would be the first to describe herself as a total and absolute mom. She will mom at everyone and everything. When she sees Will she knows straight off that something is not right. Yeah. Well she's got a cup of tea and something that Abigail cooked which for the sake of everyone's sanity they're calling rock buns with his name on.

"Will? Come on in. Have a cake thing. You need more ballast."

She turns around and disappears inside the house. There's no sign of Abigail or Wendigo so Will resigns himself to being mommed at for at least ten minutes. It occurs to him that despite being as pissed off and unsettled and Goddamit angry as he is he still has to talk to people, make nice, pass the day. He has to do this, exactly this. He stuffs all his inconvenient feelings right back down where he thinks they belong. At least for now.

Louise puts the kettle on and waits for Will to sit himself at the kitchen table. Normally he likes being here, even if Garrett can go on a bit, and Abigail can be all coltish legs and way too much enthusiasm, and Louise doing her caring bit. Normally he likes that they just let him be a part of it without it being too big a deal. For godsake he and his dad spent Thanksgiving here right before he entered that terrible last descent into illness. They're kind. They're friends, aren't they? If he can't do this he really is in trouble.

"I see what you mean about the rock buns."

"Just eat the lighter brown bits. Not all the black things are currants. She got a bit carried away with the dried fruit."

Will actually laughs and takes the nearest one from the plate on the table in front of him. He takes a cautious bite.

"Cranberry?"

Louise shrugs.

"Might be. There's apricot in there too."

She puts a mug of tea in front of him and sits down opposite cradling her own mug, elbows on the table.

"Thanks Louise." He smiles at her mug, it has a big yellow sunflower on it. He looks at his. Hmm. Forget-me-nots. Yeah. Right. He feels a surge of misery sweep across him. He buries himself in the mug and takes several long careful sips.

"Will?"

"Sorry. Miles away. Please say it again."

She smiles and reaches across to him. Not quite tapping him, but close.

"I was saying you don't have to tell me. I can see something's happened. But if you want to, I'm willing to listen. We can distract Abigail is she's minded to join us."

Louise, for all her mom-ness, wouldn't usually be his first port of call. He considers this for a moment. Actually no one is his first port of call. Time was he'd have sat down with his dad and let him do the talking. Will just absorbing it all until he felt better. When he was really little his own mom probably did the same thing. So he's kind of used to people understanding without him having to say anything. At least, not out loud.

"Sorry. I don't think I've got the words for it. Not really. Not yet at least."

She smiles across at him, just a small thing, nothing to match the sunflowers.

"Fair enough. When you do though, you know where I am. And that I'm willing. You taking Wen then? She was a good girl last night. Didn't even sneak into Abs' room until we'd gone to bed."

He smiles. She is getting smarter. Learning different people's routines. She adapts pretty fast to new environments.

"Yeah? You know you can keep her in the kitchen." He looks around. "Or in the mud room. When she's being a pest."

Louise laughs.

"Yeah. As if. That'd go down well with her highness, either of them. You want me to call them?"

Will nods. Louise goes to the kitchen door that leads out the back of the house and shouts. In the distance he hears an answering sound outside, probably Abigail, maybe Wen. A few minutes later they're both inside, Wen dribbling slightly, Abigail laughing.

"God Will. Don't eat the scones. Mom's calling them rock buns to make me feel better. Did you have one? It'll give you indigestion. You'll burp all afternoon."

Will smiles at her.

"It was ok. I ate round the weird bits."

She smiles and grabs one up from the plate. She starts to pick it apart.

"Plate Abigail. And wash your hands."

She shrugs but does as she's told promptly and then slides back into her seat rolling her eyes at Will.

"You going out?"

He nods. "Yeah. I'll just grab a bag and go up. You going out later?"

"Maybe. Dad's got some client. They're in the barn right now. Just an overnight. We'll see if he minds stroppy teenager as an add on."

“You’re not stroppy.”

Will hears Louise snort over by the sink. He dusts his hands of rock bun crumbs and gets up to take his mug over to the sink. No plate. He smiles. Only a mom in the right places.

He looks down at Wen still leaning up against Abigail’s side.

“You are such a slutty princess. What she do. Let you sleep on the bed?”

Wen whines and Abigail looks delighted.

“Awesome Will. Ok. Might see you later. Wen. Be good for the grumpy prince. He still loves you. He does!”

She rubs her face into Wen’s neck.

“Come on. He’s got your ride waiting for you. Sorry it’s not a caddy. It’s not my fault. You deserve better.”

Will glances at Louise as if to ask what, or maybe why? She gives him a look back.

“You did this to yourself. Have a good walk Will. And don’t forget. We’re always here.”

Out at the truck Will gets Wen in the back seat. He gets in the front and Abigail comes and leans through the open window.
“You know you could put a decal on the tail gate. ‘I run with wolves’ something like that. Pimp your ride.”

He looks at her.

“Do you even know what that means?”

“I know things. Bye Wen. Bye Will. See ya.”

She waves from the front porch and then closes the door after her. Gone.

“We.” He says to Wen. “We are going home. Getting the bug out bags. And we are going for a nice long walk in the hills. Because man I am still as pissed as hell. And I am going to tell you all about it. And you are going to be a good dog, and make much of me, and you know, last one up Blood Mountain makes dinner.”

He looks in the rear view mirror. Her ears had perked up at the word ‘walk’. Yup. It’s intolerable, is what it is. But at least he’s not entirely alone.

.....

Mischa looks across at Hannibal when he comes into the kitchen.

“You didn’t sleep did you? There’s coffee on the stove. You should eat something.”

He nods absently and goes to the pantry and then to the refrigerator, collecting things on the way. He brings them to the counter and sets them down. She watches him and then startles.

“Hannibal! Your eyes.”

Dully he says. “I know. I’ll have to buy some lenses. On the way to work.”

“Do you want me to come with you? I’ve nothing this morning.”

He shakes his head.

“Don’t disrupt your day. One of us is bad enough.”

“Are you going to call Will?”

“I don’t think so. I would rather acclimatise myself to this change before I have to face him again.”

She nods and frowns and decides she can’t manage any more of her protein scramble.

“I could go and talk to him. Out at his cabin. On his territory. So he feels less threatened. Omega to Omega.”

He looks up. A look of mild alarm on his face.

“He’s not out. Please don’t say anything. It would be a gross betrayal.”

“Hannibal! And this isn’t? Really?”

He waves a hand.

“Please don’t compel me to defend something I find hard to navigate.”

“You feel like you have to take his side? Oh. Is it the attachment? Sorry. I didn’t think. It’s going to take some getting used to isn’t it. For both of us.”

He prods at something on his plate. Skewers it on his fork and then eats it. Chewing without tasting whatever it is.

“For all of us I imagine. If I were feeling more myself, I’d be astounded at the effect it has had.”

She looks incredibly sad for a moment.

“I guess that’s kind of the point. You don’t get to feel just yourself any more.”

“Yes.” He says simply, acknowledging the truth of that. “I don’t.”

.....

Matthew hands a satchel over to Tobias.

“You ok?”

“Yes. Thank you. Difficult.”

“Did what we could. Up to them now.”

Tobias nods.

“What did you think of Will Graham?”

Matthew smiles, wonders for a moment if Randall has said anything. He’s not exactly discreet.

“I thought he was great. Nice guy all round. Why?”

“Franklyn wants to have him over. Just a meal. This week. Maybe Thursday.”

Matthew waits. He finishes doing up his shirt and then pulls a sweatshirt on over it. The surgery wasn’t long but he can feel a line of tension across his shoulders. Maybe he’ll hit the gym, or the pool.

“Yeah? Nice idea. Should stop Franklyn worrying. Is he worrying?”

“A little. He’s bothered that Freddie Lounds is sniffing round again. I’m sorry.”

“Yeah. I saw TattleCrime. Man I looked pissed. She’s a bitch. Abel says I should laugh it off. Not so easy though.”

“What did Hannibal say?”

“Hannibal? Oh he was as inscrutable as ever. Randall says he’s annoyed but won’t take it further unless she goes further.”

“And Randall knows this because? Oh. Wait. He and Hannibal? Really? I hadn’t realised it had gone that far.”

Matthew shrugs and shoulders his kit bag.

“I don’t know. He’s pretty keen. Anyway. Let’s not talk about Freddie Fucking Lounds. So. Will Graham. Dinner. Wait. Oh. You want me to come?”

“Would you mind? So it’s not just Franklyn worrying and me worrying about Franklyn worrying. Lighten things up a little. Didn’t you have kit you wanted to ask about?”

“Sure. I can do that. I think he’s answered most of what I couldn’t get my head round. But he did say something about it being a never ending conversation. So. Yeah. That’d be nice. Thanks. I liked him.”

Tobias eyes him speculatively. Not thinking of his own concerns for a moment. Putting two and two together. He slings the long handle of his bag over his head so it settles by his hip.

“Oh. I get it. Sorry. I’m being slow. Good. That’s great then. Happy to help things along. Franklyn wanted to have you over for a meal sometime soon anyway. Do you think I should ask any of the others?”

Matthew makes a face and mentally runs over the list of possibilities. Slowly he shakes his head.

“Nope. Don’t think so. Well, Fred would make us all look good. And would make any of Franklyn’s concerns look mild by comparison. Yeah. Actually. Ask Fred.”

Tobias smiles. He rather likes Frederick, even if he is a little blown up. Difficult when you’re the oldest son of an establishment figure and you’ve never quite fitted in.

“All right. Fred it is.”

.....

Abel reckons he’s done amazingly well not to have prodded at Hannibal. Frankly, his friend looks terrible. He’s also resisted any attempt to draw him into conversation. Abel’s running out of things to say. He sighs. His wife would just ask.

“Hannibal. All right. Stop fucking about. What’s going on? Apart from anything else you are definitely wearing lenses today. Is that why you were late this morning?”

Hannibal makes a small noise. Abel leans across the canteen table and mutters.

“Ok. You don’t want to talk about it here. I get it. Just tell me one thing. Not Randall.”

Hannibal looks up. An absolute picture of misery.

“Not Randall.”

Abel sighs. Well that’s something at least.

.....

Mischa looks around the cabin whilst Will goes to fill their mugs again. He’s been polite, a little distant and has said nothing of any use whatsoever. God. She’d like to bang their heads together. But maybe Hannibal has it wrong. Maybe it’s an incomplete attachment. Or an unreciprocated one. God. He will be devastated if that’s what it turns out to be. Or maybe Will just got scared off. Or maybe he’s already attached. Oh god. She thinks. Maybe that’s it. That must be it. He has the ring in his eyes. Maybe he’s attached to someone but not bonded and mated, or maybe it’s a Beta he’s attached to. Oh god.

She thanks him for the drink when he brings it back. And they manage another few minutes of conversation where they both talk and neither of them say anything. Eventually he sighs.

“I don’t want to be rude Mischa. But I’ve got a lot to do for this trip. I’m really sorry not to have been more help. But I hope I’ve put your mind at rest. Tell Hannibal.” She thinks he pauses then, just for a moment. “That if he needs help with the kit just to drop me an email,

ok. There's no need for you to come out here again. Though I hope you'll come out for the leaving thing. It's nice for people to have their loved ones see them off."

"All right. I'll tell him. Thank you. Look. I'm really sorry Will. I can see I'm just taking up your time now."

She folds up the quilt she'd spread over her lap and drapes it over the arm of the sofa. Smooths it down. Patchwork is so lovely she thinks especially when it's been homemade.

"Did you make this?"

He smiles a little.

"My grandma actually. My dad's ma. It's a memory quilt."

She has to blink away tears. God. No wonder Hannibal fell so hard. That's exactly the sensibility he'd warm to.

"Yes? Lovely. Artefacts like that are so meaningful." She smiles a little desperately. "Useful too. Beautiful and useful."

He nods. He can see why Hannibal loves her. She's not so dissimilar. He hadn't wanted to see it before. But yes. She's like Hannibal in lots of ways. They're well suited. Oh god.

He gets up and offers to take her mug. She simply puts it down and then goes to the door. He follows her.

"I'll walk you to the road."

She doesn't want to leave really, there has to be some way she can get him to open up. But she follows him along the path. At the crab apple she looks up at the blossom just beginning to come forth. She reaches up and touches a fragile bloom.

"So beautiful. We have family in Japan. The cherry blossom is stunning. You should..."

She stops.

He stops and stands beside her.

"Good bye Mischa. It was kind of you to come."

He looks beyond her suddenly and smiles widely.

"Alana! Hello!"

Mischa turns and sees a dark haired woman wearing jeans with a wrap dress over walking towards them. The woman, a Beta, Mischa suddenly thinks, waves.

"Hey Will! Where's Wen?"

“In the cabin. Alana, this is Mischa Lecter. Mischa this is Alana Bloom, a good friend of mine.”

Alana reaches them and manages not to look too amazed when Will leans in and kisses her on the cheek and then hugs her warmly. He whispers in her ear, on the side where Mischa cannot see or hear. “Play along. I’ll explain later.”

He slings an arm round her shoulder and turns them both to face Mischa.

“Thanks for coming Dr Lecter. Please tell the other Dr Lecter I’ll look forwards to seeing him the end of the week. You too, if you fancy it.”

Will squeezes her shoulder. Alana grins.

“You should see the food order. It’s crazy.”

Mischa frowns a little.

“The kit list was bad enough.”

Alana shrugs and smiles at Will.

“He knows what he’s doing.”

Mischa nods and maybe looks a little sad.

“I hope so.”

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

> A very kind anonymous person who doesn't have a tumblr account nevertheless got in touch with the admin of FreshMeatFriday to recommend this fic.
>
> I'm very grateful. There may have been a few happy tears. Thank you.

"Are you Will? You must be, I know the others. I'm Franklyn, Toby must have said. Oh is that wine? Oh that's so kind of you. Really it's nothing formal. Just a friendly meal. I'm not bad as a cook, but you know how it is. Oh. Don't look so worried Tobias is cooking."

Franklyn shuts the front door and ushers Will into his and Tobias's apartment. It's an eclectic mix of soothing neutrals with some quirky oddments thrown in. Some slightly out of the box kitsch and colour. Will suddenly realises this is the result of a combination of two adult's possessions. Men who'd grown and adapted to life on their own and then met, and combined every aspect of their personalities. He frowns at what he thinks is a stuffed Starship Enterprise. He wonders which of the couple has given most ground in the arrangement of their lives. Or indeed which of them still is. He focuses on his host.

"It's nice of you to ask. I'm glad to come out.. stop me thinking about the stuff I still haven't packed. I've still got a delivery of food to come. Parcel out into piles. Are you coming on Saturday?"

Will follows Franklyn through the hallway towards a living space that's bigger than he expected. Franklyn catches him looking.

"Do you like it? Nice isn't it? We knocked out a wall to make the room larger. Give ourselves somewhere to eat comfortably. Chat to the person cooking. I think it's worked well."

Will nods.

"Yeah. It's good. I like open plan myself. Saturday?"

Franklyn wiggles his head a little. Pauses. Peers forwards towards the kitchen el where he and Will can just hear voices.

"Listen. Toby thinks I'm worried. I'm not very. But I think he worries more about me than he realises. This will help him feel all right about going off and leaving me behind."

"He's protective."

It's a statement and not a question. Franklyn smiles and makes an acquiescing noise.

“The full nine yards. He gets annoyed about it. People assume that because I’m Beta it doesn’t matter so much to him. We can’t bond like that. But you’ll have seen his eyes. We’re firmly attached.”

Will nods. He tries not to look too obviously but Franklyn crinkles his own eyes in amusement. Some Betas with Alpha or Omega partners who’s eyes change wear lenses to indicate their own attachment.

“No. No lenses. I think if I thought he was really bothered I would. But he knows how I feel.” He rubs at his tie, twiddles with it. “Listen to me. Going all California on you. That’s the therapist bit coming out isn’t it. Nicely done Dr Graham. Do lots of your clients talk to you like this. Up in the hills. Where the great outdoors reveals us to ourselves.”

Will tips his head to one side. He’s heard others say this. That they unburden themselves in the woods. Let go of the artifice and masquerade of the every day. It’s a perceptive observation that Will himself might foster it.

“Lots of ways to find yourself in the wilds.”

“Oh. I thought you’d say lose yourself. Nice. I do like that.”

“I try not to lose anyone. I haven’t. Not yet. No reason to start this time.”

“No. Of course not. Thank you. And thank you for helping in my little subterfuge. Albeit unwittingly. Fred and Matthew are here. I think Fred could do with some reassurance. You’ve met him? Good. He’s a decent man overshadowed by his family and their expectations of him. Lost his partner. Died in an accident. There’s some sadness there. He covers it with bluster and some good sleight of hand but it means he’s easy to overlook.”

Will blinks at him.

“Any more character insights? I wish I’d met you last week.”

Franklyn smiles.

“I barely know Randall or Matthew, it’s why Matty is here. Say hello a bit. You know. And I’ve met their new Fellow just once. Though I liked him. Very natty dresser, lovely ties and pocket square combos. You met Hannibal. Oh wait. You met all of them. Of course. What did you think.”

“Yes. You’re right. Nice pocket squares.”

And the rest.

Franklyn eyes him.

“All right. I won’t ask you.”

God Will thinks, is he that transparent? He better work on that some.

.....

Hannibal closes his front door and then leans on the inside panel. He's not entirely sure he can manage Mischa right now. He removes his shoes, puts them beside the front door, neatly. And then slips quietly upstairs.

In his bedroom. Designed solely with his aesthetic pleasure in mind he takes off his jacket, hangs it over the back of a chair, he undoes his tie, places it over the jacket, and then removes his cuff links and puts them in a small dish on top of a chest of drawers. He takes off his belt and coils it. Places it on the same chest of drawers. He untucks his shirt but doesn't remove either that or his trousers.

Then he goes to his bed and pulls back the covers and lies down on it. Sighs. Stares up at the ceiling. Wonders at the conceit that had led him to have the constellations of the northern hemisphere as they would be seen from their home in Lithuania painted on it. Closes his eyes. Waits for sleep to claim him. Hollow him out some more.

.....

In the main kitchen area Fred is laughing at something Tobias is saying. Whatever he's stirring on the stove smells warm, of sunshine, and is faintly Mediterranean. Matthew turns to Will.

"Hey. How are you Dr Graham? We're arguing the merits of different herbs. Don't ask. There might have been an incident with, what is it Tobe?"

"Tarragon."

Matthew turns to Will and shrugs.

"Tarragon. For the chicken. We've had to settle for rosemary. Which apparently is not the same at all."

Tobias frowns at him.

"I don't mind really. It's just the recipe says tarragon. I like to follow the recipe."

Franklyn laughs and holds up the wine bottle to the room.

"Now, Will was a nice guest and brought wine. I'm going to open it. One glass each and then I'm cutting you all off. No DUIs on my watch. Sorry. Not sorry. Fred?"

"Thanks. Please."

Franklyn roots around in a drawer and finds a cork-screw with arms. He holds it up and waves it around.

"This is our 'Franklyn corkscrew'! For when I throw my arms up in despair. Tobes has a proper one but this is the one I like. Also, I've never destroyed a cork with it. Though watch

me now. Having said that I can make it work I'm bound to have a small disaster. Actually. Matthew. You look like you'd be handy with a corkscrew. Have at it?"

He ghosts a wink at Matthew who gives him a small tight smile back which gradually slides into something easier.

"Funny. Yeah. Of course. Glasses?"

They spend a moment or too opening, pouring and handing round. Tobias pronounces himself happy with the sauce, despite the regrettable rosemary, and pulls a fragrant chicken with crisped potatoes from the oven. They all move towards the large round table to eat. Fred smiles. He's had two meals out with friends this week. He's being sociable again. This is good. Really good. Well done to him he thinks.

Before they start doling out food Franklyn takes Tobias' hand and then reaches out to take Fred's. He seems to know the score and reaches for Will's. Tobias and Matthew complete the circle. There's a moment of quiet and then a squeeze of the hands suggest the moment of pause is done.

"Bon appetit."

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At the vehicles, at the end of the evening, Matthew shrugs, glances at Fred and then Will. Moistens his lips.

"Good evening wasn't it? Friendly. Helpful"

Frederick smiles.

"I think it was. Will, see you at the weekend. I'll try not to get in state about it again. Sorry. Thanks for taking the time."

Will shakes his head.

"Really. I'm glad we wrung some of the angst out of it. Better for you, much better for me too. You know. Enlightened self interest and all. I'm glad you're feeling better about it. Want me to rig the tent allocation so you don't get stuck with Jack?"

Fred leans back against his car door and laughs.

"Can you do that? Yes! God. A thousand times yes! Please. And don't tell him!"

Will smiles.

"Sure. I'm sure we can manage that. You'll not be the only one to sidle up to me and ask, I can guarantee it. You think we should swop out every time we move camp? Really it's just a way to get people to talk to each other more. Learn to deal with each other's foibles."

“I know. But I’ll just irritate Jack. I know that. And actually, and for goodness sake don’t tell him so, but he’d annoy the hell out of me. You won’t tell him. Will you?”

He breathes a sigh of relief as Will shakes his head.

“Your secret is actually safe with me. I know it’s something people say. But I’m good at keeping my own counsel. Go on. See you Saturday.”

He and Matthew watch as Frederick gets into his car. Toots his horn, even if it is a bit late at night for a residential area, and then goes.

Matthew turns to Will.

“You were nice to him. Not just because he’s a client. Franklyn too, though I think that was for Tobias’ sake wasn’t it? I mean Franklyn got him to ask us because he knew Toby needed it.”

Will shrugs.

“You caught that then? Well. Kindness isn’t costly. Not really. A little time and thought. That’s all.”

Matthew nods. They’re both quiet for a moment. Matthew makes a small sighing noise, a little blow of air. He tips his chin up just a little. Clenches and unclenches his hands.

“It’s just terrible timing. Isn’t it. Yeah? I’m right aren’t I? If this trip wasn’t happening? I’d just ask you back. If you wanted.”

Will looks at him.

“You could ask me anyway.”

Matthew frowns and Will can see him have an internal debate about the advisability of it. He thinks he swears under his breath.

“Straight up?” Will nods. Matthew swears again. Quietly. “Honestly? I’d like to take you home and fuck you. Hard. Maybe a couple of times. Turn it about. You fuck me. God. I’d like you to really fuck me.” He swallows hard. His Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat. “You’d like that? Then I’d like to come all over your arse. Mark you. Use your mouth.” He pauses. He bends and rests his hands on his knees. Takes a few more deep breaths. “Fuck.” He straightens up. Adjusts himself. “You look like you’re ready to agree. But it’s a shit idea. Right now anyway. I hate myself for this right at this moment. Fuck. I’m never this sensible. I should have drunk more of the wine. I’m going to not ask. Not now. Not yet. Just go home and be a sad fuck who has a wank in the shower. Ok.”

Will nods slowly.

He takes a deep breath.

“Which of us is the sad fuck in this scenario? But. You’re right. Bad idea. A great idea. But a bad one too.”

Matthew sighs again but looks happier.

“Good. Glad I got that out there. And you know. Woods. We’ll see. After? Maybe?”

“You might hate me by the end.”

Matthew frowns, shakes his head.

“Might still want to fuck you though.”

It startles a laugh out of Will.

“Not what I expected you to say. All right. I’ll see you Saturday. And Matthew? Thanks. It was a good evening.”

.....

“Everything coming together?”

Will turns easily to Margot Verger. She shifts slightly to stand in the shade of a hazel. The squeaky green of the buds just coming in. Alana is still in the storage shed to the side of Will’s cabin.

“Pretty much. This was the last of the food. Tomorrow, wow, that came up fast. Yeah. Tomorrow. Get all the families to do a send off. Chat to each other. Make nice. Bit of food, soft drinks. It makes those left behind feel less alone. And have someone to call if they remember something they wish they’d done or said.”

Margot laughs.

“It’s only two weeks in the woods. These woods are lovely.”

She looks around her beyond the clearing around Will’s cabin. Alana comes up alongside her.

“Lovely? Yes. In the sunlight. When your tent hasn’t been blown down in a gale, or you fell in the poison oak, or mice ate into your feedbag, or your camp mates bitch about their sleeping bag getting wet when the tent blew down, cos they didn’t damn well stake it properly. Even though you told them. Several times.”

Margot and Will look at each other and laugh.

“Wow. Voice of experience there! I take the point.”

Margot puts an arm round her. Carries on.

“That bad?”

Alana sniffs. She squeezes Margot’s side. Smiles at her.

“You’d pay attention if I told you your lines were off wouldn’t you?”

Margot grins and rolls her eyes at Will.

“I wouldn’t be out there in the first place. I take it back. The woods are only lovely at a distance.”

Alana smiles at her and then at Will.

“Ready?”

“Pretty much. You want to both come tomorrow? The send off? 10am? Should be done by about 11:30. The doctors are all interesting, I’ve met a few of their partners. Good group. Garret and Louise are coming. Maybe Abigail if she can be persuaded it won’t be too much of a drag.”

The two women share an unspeaking glance between each other.

“Sure. Sounds good. Why not.”

Alana is about to ask something further when they hear the phone ringing inside the cabin.

“We’ll let you grab that. Margot?”

He watches them for a moment as they turn to leave and then hops up and across the porch quick smart to make it to the landline before his answer service switches in.

“Will Graham. Help you?”

.....

Will puts the phone down. Thinks about what Jack just said. He realises he’s shaking. Actually shaking. God. He’s so not past this in any way. Everything he thought he’d managed to reconcile, fit together, deal with. Scattered again.

“Wen? Come on, we’re gonna visit dad. Coming?”

She perks her ears up. To her the words have come to mean a walk in a particular place where she must be leashed but where Will keeps her close and hugs her a lot. There are always treats after. She’s up and beside him straight away. For sure she always comes when called. But ‘dad’ means ‘now’ and ‘urgent’ and ‘help me’ to her.

On the drive it begins to rain, just a shower, nothing elemental. And anyway he’s got a raincoat in the back. He’s ready. Tastes like ashes now, all his careful forethought. Prepared? For so many things. Not for this though. Not this.

At the cemetery where his father is buried Will empties the jar containing last week’s daffodils and adds some small branches of crab-apple blossom to the grave marker. The earth

hasn't settled quite so he hasn't had a stone put up yet. He will. He's still thinking about what it should say. His father would have had the words handy but he's struggling with it a little. He said everything he wanted to say, his dad too. What's left to say to others of what he meant in the world, to the world, except to Will, for whom he was the whole world. What's left?

When he has tidied up the grave and the surrounding area he sits cross legged beside it. Never mind the damp. Wen comes and leans into him and he sits there with his arms round her.

"I talked to Jack. He asked me to try and rig the tent arrangements. He explained, really politely and considerately of their feelings and everything, that something's going on between Hannibal and one of the other doctors. Some romance or relationship, or sex or something. And could I make sure they were separate. So it doesn't get awkward."

He stops. Doesn't worry about the tears on his face. They'll get lost in the rain.

"It's going to kill me dad. It hurts."

There's no magical voice from beyond. No sign. Why doesn't the rain stop he thinks. Like a message or a prayer answered. Something to show he's been heard, understood, and that there will be a comfort. Small mercies he thinks desperately as he gets up. Can't he have even a modicum of a small mercy

.....

Randall grins at Matthew.

"Did you go back with him? Hey, can I have the creamer? Thanks. Matthew? Did you?"

Tobias pushes the jug nearer to Randall and quietly says.

"Randall. You might want everyone to hear about your affairs, maybe Matthew wants to keep it a little more on the down low." He turns to Matthew curiously. "All right. I want to know too. Did you? You looked. I don't know. Intimate? Possibly."

Matthew drinks from his cup of coffee and leans back in the plastic chair. Lounges. He puts one hand behind his head and stretches. There's something faintly lewd and suggestive in his pose. More so when he puts down his cup and hooks his thumb in the front loop of his trousers. Hand almost over his crotch. Tobias raises his eyebrows and then glances up.

"Hannibal? Come and sit. We're just quizzing Matthew."

Hannibal smiles tightly but joins the three men at the table. Randall smiles at him. He hasn't asked if Hannibal is wearing lenses in anticipation or because the minor dalliances at the Opera has created a provisional attachment between them. His own eyes haven't changed yet but he's felt some kind of shift, something fundamental. Bio-Chemical. He knows some families encourage their Alphas and Omegas to wear lenses along with collars once presented. Maybe Hannibal is just getting with the programme. Randall sits up. Oh. Maybe

he's talked to his mother about what to do, if he's interested in someone seriously. A smile starts on his face. He looks back at Matthew.

"Matthew and Tobias had dinner with the wild man of the woods last night. Tell me Matthew are his sheets plaid too."

Matthew snorts and returns to sitting upright in his chair. The insouciance of a moment ago dispersing.

"Yeah. And I'm telling you that? I don't think so. I told you before. I like him. The timing's a bit shit. He and I talked about that. But you know. After. We'll see."

Hannibal stares blankly at him.

"Do you mean Will?"

Matthew yawns.

"Uh huh. Franklyn wanted him to come round to make Toby feel better about the trip. Or the other way round. I forget which. Anyway. Fred and I came to make up the numbers. It was great actually. I'll give you this. He's got fantastic hands. And I think I can safely say it was all pretty mutual."

Tobias laughs. A happy huff of noise.

"Well if it's got you in his good books, that's great Matty."

Randall leans across the table and smirks at Matthew.

"It's not his books you want to be in is it Matthew?"

"Fuck off Randall. Like I said. After the trip."

The conversation continues and Hannibal pays a kind of scant attention. This cannot be allowed. He must do something. Say something. Randall glances at him idly.

"You look a bit tired Hannibal. Are you finished for the day?"

Hannibal nods. Still distracted. He feels as though a band has been tightened around his chest and every now again someone tightens it, just a notch. It is absolute torture. It brings his breath up short, constrains his diaphragm, hurts his heart. Physically, as though it had been squeezed. He tries to take a breath, but he feels like it is more of a stagger as he gets to his feet.

"You're right. I am fatigued. I shall see you all tomorrow. Let me know if anyone needs anything. We're giving Frederick a lift. Randall, are you set?"

"Yeah. I'm good. Thanks. See you tomorrow. Might call you if I think of anything."

As Hannibal nods briefly at him and walks away Matthew looks at Randall.

“Everything ok? Oh. Wait. Are you why he looks so tired. Damn man! I’ll give it to you Randall. You live up to your name.”

Randall frowns and then grins. It’s a joke as tired as Hannibal looked. But, hey. Quite funny.

“Don’t think we haven’t spotted how far you’ve deflected the conversation Matthew. So. Did you or didn’t you?”

Matthew just smiles.

“Like I said. Great hands.”

.....

Hannibal gets into his car. In the morning he’d been slightly irritated that his normal parking spot had been taken. Someone perhaps not aware or nor caring about the rules and etiquette governing the allotment of allocated spaces. Now though he’s somewhat glad. It means his misery will have some privacy.

The car is parked off in a corner of the sprawling lot. The sodium lights haven’t come on yet so he’s spared their jaundiced gaze at least. As he sits there he thinks about the good humour and evening’s entertainment described and, dear God, joked about by Tobias and Matthew.

Unbearable. Simply eviscerating.

He hopes he has managed to dissemble amongst his colleagues. At least it is only Abel who seems to have the measure of the disaster that has befallen him. Of course Jack had fumbled around something to do with Randall. And hadn’t that been a modestly embarrassing conversation? Nothing to how it could have gone though. If Will had.. if they had. It will be humiliating enough he thinks. There must be something he can do. Anything.

When he starts the engine the CD player comes on and he lets the Grieg weave it’s magic through him.

He doesn’t feel worse by the time he gets home, even if he doesn’t feel better. A period of stasis. A liminal place between pain and the absence of anticipation that pain will eventually come to an end. And he has at least thought of something he can do. God, it is the helplessness that he’s struggling with. He has never felt so useless in the face of his own inadequacies. It would be easier if he could simply be angry with Will, be hurt by him. But somehow, he knows, believes that the fault lies with him. That something he did, or said, or is, caused this rejection. How bitter a taste it leaves in his mouth. How sour.

Once indoors he hangs his coat up in the armoire in the lobby and instead of the kitchen he heads straight for his study. He plugs in his tablet, makes sure the connection is working, the router for some reason drops in this room. Of all the rooms it could cease to work in this one is the most inconvenient. He’d like that to be a metaphor, thank you. Some externalisation of his abiding loss. He begins to compose an email.

Chapter 12

First light, which isn't actually as early as it sounds Will makes sure everything is ready out in his storage shed. It's too small to be a barn and wasn't designed for livestock, or feed, or the store of any harvest. So in his mind it's simply a shed. The large double doors that front it open wide, and he's propped them to stay that way as the weather looks set fine for the morning at least. He's set up trestle tables on both sides and along the rear and has the food neatly allocated into piles off to one side. On the other side he's set up mugs and a couple of tins of cookies and small buns. There's a large urn for hot water and he'll get that going in plenty of time. The central tables will get used for the gear sorting. And won't that be fun? For him at least, though he tries to be kind about people's bad decisions.

Next to the food are maps and compasses for everyone. Decent ones. Compasses that didn't come out of a cracker at Christmas along with a joke and a funny hat. And maps that won't get you lost because the detail is missing, or there isn't enough or it's downright misleading. He's learnt not to ask people to bring their own. What people think will work out in the woods is almost always wrong. So he doesn't ask, or put it on the kit list. Just supplies them for everyone along with the tents.

They'll do map reading first thing tomorrow. And with any luck some of the guys did scouting or woodcraft folk or similar and will have a clue. And if not? Well it doesn't take much to get to grips with it. Just a few observational skills and some patience. Yeah. Let's see about that.

Today though is real simple. Gear check. Tent draw. Four mile walk, though most of it is uphill so he anticipates some quiet swearing and bitching, then tents, supper, cat holes, water, get everyone asleep or at least to bed. And then morning. Done. Rinse. Repeat.

He looks again at the pile of food. Everyone is getting four and a half pounds. Together with the water that makes almost six and a half pounds of extra weight each. He could get them to take less water. For today. The recent rain means the two seeps they'll pass will be plentiful. Still, they'll need it for cooking and washing later. But he's willing to negotiate a little. He expects that one or two of them will be miserable for the first couple of days. Still. He's adjusted his expectations up a little because they are all Alphas. Even if two of them are slighter, two of them somewhat rangy and one kind of average. The other two though? Both have the heft and bulk. Damn. He mustn't think of Hannibal. How he felt. His hands. His mouth.

He looks around again. All set. He switches the large water urn on. It takes a bit over an hour to heat this amount of water to boiling. By then people will have begun to arrive.

"Come on. You want second breakfast? I bet you do. I want second breakfast. Come on. Good girl Wen. Grub's up."

As soon as they're indoors he goes into the kitchen and automatically checks the slosh of water in the tea kettle before switching the burner on underneath it. He fills Wen's water bowl

and puts down half a handful of biscuits for her. He throws a tea bag into his own mug. His dad had always preferred to use a pot, but, well, as it's just him drinking a cup, tea bag it is.

He listens for a moment. Loons. Just a small flock flying over, a little late on their migration but the weather will do that. He smiles. It means they should be up on one of the small lakes when they get there in a few day's time. God, they make the best noise. Eerie and haunting. Maybe they could... he stops. Fuck. Thinks of the fun things he has done with adult groups getting them to chill a bit. Relax with each other. All ghost stories round the fire and childhood memories, and bad singing. Yeah. Well. He'll just have to let the woods work their magic and find a way to talk to Hannibal.

When he has made his tea he steps over to his desk and opens his laptop just to set up an 'out of office' email ping back. Maybe he should just do a quick check, see if there are any last minute queries. He waits for his connection. He remembers to feel glad it works at all out here rather than being pissed about how slow it always is.

When he opens his email account he drafts what his dad used to call his 'gone fishing' note then checks. Oh. God. Hannibal. Just for a moment he wonders if he's going to duck out of the whole thing, feign some illness. But as he reads he realises that's not it at all.

He reads it a couple of times. If he were feeling sentimental maybe he'd print it out and bring it with him. It feels faintly familiar somehow. As he sits back in his desk chair he tries to catch the thought. Abigail. She had to do Austen winter before last. In literature class. Fell in love with half the heroes and heroines too. Wouldn't stop talking about them. The dynamics hadn't been quite understood back then, and there was still a lot of prejudice, and really it wasn't the done thing to actually talk or write about them in Regency England, but for all that? Well, you could read between the lines easily enough. Yeah. He thinks. This is one of those kind of letters. Mr Darcy? Fuck. Why did Hannibal have to be such a romantic?

Will sighs and then leans over his desktop and switches the printer on and lets it warm up. Whilst he's waiting he reads it again on the screen. Thinks about crying. And prints it out. He reads it again and then carefully folds it up and puts it in his rear pocket. Yeah. He knows it. He might be too.

He finishes his tea, switches off both bits of electronics, washes up his mug at the sink and then goes round the cabin and tidies. Anyone who hasn't yet seen inside will almost certainly want a quick look. They always do. He checks each room for anything he might have forgotten.

In the bathroom he curses himself when he finds his forgotten bottle of plus-suppressants right where it usually is in the bathroom tucked into the corner of a shelf. He gets it open, tearing the card of the outer box in the process and dry swallows today's dose, he throws the box in the trash can for paper under the sink, and slots the bottle into his front pants pocket. He shakes his head at himself. Well fuck, if that isn't his subconscious being a bit of a bitch. He does however find his favourite memory foam ear plugs so he pockets those as well. He pulls the email out again and re-reads it. Steels himself. God. They have to talk at least. There's nothing transcendent about this level of mutual suffering. Maybe later he can pull Hannibal aside. Yeah. Maybe.

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Franklyn nods seriously at something Abigail is saying. Her father has dragged Donald Sutcliffe along, he had half a mind to come anyway given that half the gear Tobias is carrying actually belongs to him. And it's fun. He smiles at the two of them and drifts away a little. Their conversation is about something largely incomprehensible, some teen meme, or show, or game. Franklyn always knows these things. But then, he does ask, and listens. Donald smiles. Kids always warm up to Franklyn. Usually straight off. He's so, so disarming Donald thinks. He's always liked him, even before he and Tobias got together. He turns to his friend.

"Ready?"

"I guess. Thank you though. And you don't mind checking in at the end of the week?"

"Of course. I'll just give him a quick ring and make sure he's ok."

"Make sure Freddie Lounds hasn't been pestering him."

Donald frowns.

"Not that reporter? Blast. Toby. That's poor."

"She's hassling Hannibal and Matthew at the moment. But I expect her to circle back at some point. Find a vulnerability."

Donald nods. He remembers what it was like last time around.

"I understand. I'll keep a weather eye out for any storm fronts shaped like a red headed fury." He tips his chin towards Will. "Let me know what he's like as a guide could you? Garrett and Abigail both rate him highly, but I'd be glad of a second opinion."

"Sure. Oh. Have you met Matthew?"

"The slightly self aware smooth talking one. Or the slightly self aware sexy one?"

Tobias squints at him.

"Really? Ok. Errr. I think you mean the sexy one. Of the two. The other's Randall Tier. No. Matthew. Possibly interested in Will. Though the timing is somewhat off."

"But he's attached. Isn't he?"

Tobias looks at him in surprise. "Is he? I didn't see that. He came for dinner. Maybe he wears lenses."

Donald nods. "Well, that seems likely. I met him up in the woods. Definitely. Quite a thin ring so maybe still provisional. But attached."

Tobias shrugs. "Well. Maybe Matthew doesn't know that. It can't be him anyway. Although. I suppose. If they.. Wait. That can't be right." He pauses and whispers to Donald. "That would

mean he's an Omega."

Donald looks at him.

"Not necessarily. His partner could be. Or a Beta. Or anything. Come on Toby. You know it's a myth. You're a doctor for goodness sake! Only Betas don't have rings. And not all Alphas and Omegas do. Plenty of attachments and bonds even with no eye changes. Even same primary sex can change each other." He frowns. "Why do you think he's an Omega?"

Tobias shakes his head.

"You're right. Just guesswork on my part and probably completely wrong. But I don't know. Something."

"For goodness sake keep it to yourself. He hasn't mentioned it. So he might not be out."

Tobias agrees quickly, there's enough gossip circulating in the group about Randall's burgeoning courtship of Hannibal and Matthew's candid appreciation of what Randall is now calling the wild man's assets. Tobias thinks he was not being especially nice when he said it. Donald swivels his gaze round the groups.

"Who is the woman with your new guy?"

Tobias turns.

"Oh, his sister. On sabbatical at Georgetown. Quite charming. They're pretty devoted."

"I like the old fashioned collars. Isn't his partner here to see him off?"

"Actually that's Randall. It's a new thing. We're not really supposed to talk about it. I think he's a bit excited about it. His eyes haven't changed yet but he says he can feel a difference."

Donald smiles. An attachment is a thing to be celebrated. Even if Alpha/Alpha can't fully bond it's still something enriching.

"All right. Introduce me to Ms Lecter. I can see you want to."

"Dr Lecter actually. She's a PhD. Come on. She's nice. Though she flirts with Frederick too much."

"Oh. Bring him along too. I like Fred."

Tobias looks at him.

"I didn't know that. You should have said." He smirks at Donald. He's very fond of his friend. He's always been supportive.

"Come on. Let's leave Abigail to it. She's got Franklyn wrapped round her little finger."

Donald looks at the pair and then at his friend.

“You think? With Franklyn it’s usually the other way round.”

.....

Hannibal looks over Will’s book case, a cup of tea in hand. They were told they could wander as they liked and he has taken the opportunity to snoop. He can just about admit to himself that that is what he is doing.

He tips his head so that he can read along the line of titles. Notes a shadow box propped between two sections of titles acting as a bookend. There are fishing flies inside. Just five, set in three rows. Two, one, two. He moves along to a different bookcase. He rather likes that some people still have cds on display. It means you can see where musical tastes might overlap without having to interrogate the other person too closely.

Will had been truthful. He does like opera. There’s a very good selection. Some of it overlapping with Hannibal’s. There’s also some baroque and a few surprising jazz excursions. There are some of the Scandinavian composers of the 19th and 20th centuries and even a few bits of well known and well orchestrated film scores.

Hannibal can’t decide if he feels elated or utterly dejected. Both he thinks. Can’t it be both?

Mischa had attempted to describe the interior of the cabin. But as he looks around he can see the things she has missed, or simply skipped over. Despite the manifest ways in which it is different from their own home in Baltimore it is also somewhere where he would feel at ease. Comfortable. As though he fitted.

He looks around. At present there is no one else here, so he steps to the closed door off to one side at the rear of the living room and opens it.

It’s just a simple bedroom. Almost empty of furniture and things. There’s a bed with sheets and blankets. A chest of drawers. Some hooks above a shelf. An old straw hat sitting on the shelf. Looking like it’s seen better years let alone better days. There’s a small, mostly empty bookcase. On the floor is a peg rug. It’s clean, but worn. And in one corner is a battered armchair. Possibly one that reclines.

“It was my dad’s room.”

Hannibal startles at Will’s voice at his shoulder. Hannibal makes a truncated gesture.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have.”

Will sighs.

“It’s ok. I didn’t say anywhere was off limits. I couldn’t bring myself to get rid of his hat. I still don’t know what to do with some of his things.”

There’s a long pause between them.

“Thank you for the email. I’d like to talk to you about it later. Would that be all right?”

Hannibal looks at him carefully and closely, takes a small step nearer. He shifts his hand towards Will's face, almost but not quite touching.

"I don't believe you. That your eyes were ringed before. Mischa told me what you said."

"I know. I'm sorry. Look..." he closes his eyes, opens them and looks at Hannibal again.

"Yours turned too, didn't they? I'm so sorry."

Hannibal drops his hand but Will catches it.

"We will talk later. I'll try and explain why it's ... well, why it's impossible for me."

"Thank you. An explanation would help. I find myself utterly distraught at the thought of losing you."

Will slumps and sighs. "God. I know. I do know." He brings Hannibal's hand up to his mouth and kisses it. Closes his eyes to do so. "Really. I feel gutted about it. But I'll explain. And we'll just. I don't know. Tough it out."

Hannibal starts to pull his hand away but Will can't help a small noise of protest and he simply pulls him closer, their joined hands between them. Will knows he really shouldn't, tries not to think of Mischa outside somewhere, and leans up as Hannibal lowers his face and kisses him back.

Their kiss is fuelled by the misery of the last few days. Will pulls Hannibal into his dad's bedroom and closes the door, not breaking the kiss as he does so.

Slowly they pull apart and Hannibal looks at him sadly.

"Your mind is not changed."

"It's not that easy for me... look. We have to do this thing. I've got a job to do. We'll talk about this later. I want to. I promise."

Will opens the door and walks across the living room. Hannibal follows and just catches Will's hand by the fingertips.

"I have to ask. I'm sorry. I can't not know. Matthew Brown. He says... Did you and he?"

Will frowns and bursts out.

"What? No! Of course not! Fuck! What do you think I am? Wow. You're a fine one to talk. God. Jack told me all about Randall Tier. Hedging your bets were you? God. Freddie Lounds was right."

Hannibal draws himself up and his voice grows colder.

"Randall and I have done nothing. He means nothing to me. How could you say such a thing? There's no comparison. None." He makes a grimace. "And had there been it would at least

have been before we met."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean? Wow. That is so low. All right. I didn't go home with Matthew. Nor did I fuck him in my truck. Or vice versa." He sees Hannibal flinch. "Would you feel better if I said I'd never fucked an Alpha? It's been Betas and Omegas. Ok? No one has had me that way."

He pauses, breathes hard, angry. Hannibal's eyes darken and Will sees that possessiveness again. Shit. Still as effective as hell at turning him on.

"Don't." He says. "Don't let what you took away from that exchange be that you'd be the first. Ok? Just fucking don't. Fuck you. You're not that... don't be that. Fuck. God."

He wipes a hand over his face and then rubs it through his hair and glares at Hannibal.

"I have to go out there, and make nice, and do my fucking job. Please. Please don't make something that's already difficult become impossible. Please."

He sees Hannibal shift his stance. A slight give in his mein.

"You're right. I'm sorry. At this rate I will find myself continually apologising... I don't want to argue Will. I truly don't. Let's go and find the others. And I promise not to make things worse. Or at least I will try not to."

"Yeah? Well, we'll see about that. Come on. And look. Do you think we could both. Matthew and Randall. I know I don't have any right to. But..."

Hannibal reaches past him and holds the door of the cabin open.

"You do Will. You do."

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Louise Hobbs laughs at something Alana is saying and watches as Abigail goes to help Will draw the names for the tent allocation.

She claps her hands to get everyone's attention and then bows to Will.

"All right. I think we've got all the gear sorted. Mrs Crawford, thank you for taking the rejected items home with you. Everyone's knees and backs will be very grateful tomorrow even if there's a certain amount of resistance to leaving things behind right now. Ok this is the tent draw moment. The tents are shared between two. You'll also carry it between you. They're ultralight pyramids. They take four walking poles to erect. And you'll take the ground sheet and the main tent, one bit each. And split the pegs. You'll hardly notice you've got them. Try hard not damage them. They're virtually indestructible, which is why I've only lost one in the last year. But they're sixteen hundred bucks a pop, so, really, try not to."

The whole group hear a low bored voice say.

"Isn't that what insurance is for?"

Will doesn't answer. He's got a good idea who that is.

"So. To make it utterly impartial. My extremely intelligent assistant will draw the names."

Abigail's prods him and hisses.

"Glamorous, I'm supposed to be glamorous."

"My mistake. My extremely intelligent and also glamorous assistant will help."

With a certain amount of fanfare she pulls a slip of folded paper from a bowl and hands it to Will.

"Jack." She pulls the next one and it's Fred. With barely a pause Will announces "Tobias." Then "Randall" the next says Tobias. "Matthew." Good that's those two sorted out. She pulls Abel, that's simple "Abel." Then it's Hannibal's name and he promptly says "Frederick" and then he realises what he's done. She pulls Matthews name, "Me." And then he unfolds the last name, and it can only say Randall. "Hannibal". Shit. He dumps all the names back in the bowl. And doesn't look at Hannibal or at Mischa who is whispering urgently in Hannibal's ear.

God. What has he done? Even if the others are happy with their lot. Still, at least it means that the only people really suffering are together.

Yeah. He thinks. It's shit.

.....

Those that are staying behind help their friends and partners with their backpacks. There is good natured name calling and joshing. Will catches a dark look from Mischa and tries not to flush. Yeah. He probably deserves that. At the very least. He rallies himself.

"Ok. Folks. We're back two weeks tomorrow. If we're not back by Sunday evening send in the cavalry. Or the FBI, they've got better trackers."

Everyone laughs though Will has left a detailed itinerary with both Garret and the local Wardens. People don't get lost as an everyday occurrence, but it does happen. And though he has a satellite phone with a beacon he'd rather not rely on the technology alone. But really, the full Appalachian Trail can take six months. This two weeks in the woods by comparison is small potatoes.

The party sets off, Wen shepherding them from behind. And though they're in conversation for the first ten minutes this dies away when they hit the first steeper incline.

Abel looks at Jack when they both pause to lean on their walking poles and catch their breath.

"Don't come moaning to me. This was your idea."

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An hour later and they stop to drink some water and refill at the first seep. Will explains how the squeezable filters work and encourages everyone to have a go even if they've not drunk much so far. They've gone two miles. Which for the first afternoon is all right. All up hill as well.

"We're half way to where we will pitch for tonight. Practice with the tents. Get a fire going. We'll have an early meal and then a snack just before bed time. Two people will be allocated to water duty, wood duty, washing up and one to tidy up the campsite. Tomorrow we'll rota in cooking too. Not today, I'll cook this evening. Don't get too excited. I know it sounds draconian but it works. Ok, and those doing water also do the cat holes. I'll show you where for both. For today, different pairs to tent buddies. We'll do it by alphabet. So. Abel and Fred, Hannibal and Jack. Wait. That doesn't work. Oh you know never mind. Tobias you do tidy up. Matthew and Randall could you do water. Oh. Yeah. Abel you and Fred wash up? The wood collection Hannibal and Jack. It's better to know what you're doing in advance of set up that way when we get there and the tents are up you can just get on with it. Ok?"

The rest of the group look slightly stunned. Jack slumps.

"You're the boss."

"Yes." Will says artificially brightly. "I am."

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The next two miles the terrain levels out some and conversation gradually resumes. Will listens to different fragments. So far, apart from the utter wildfire that is Hannibal he quite likes all the group. Well. Maybe excepting Randall, though he knows that might just be fruit of the poison tree. Matthew and Tobias seem to get on with him fine so maybe he's ok really.

When they reach a small level area that's been cleared of scrub with a rock-ringed fire pit in the centre Will calls a halt.

"Ok. East is that way, so you can orientate your tent doors to catch the dawn if you'd like, or you can do the exact opposite. Watch the sun go down. Most groups make a rough circle round the fire. We're not on a game trail here so no worries about nocturnal visitors."

"Bears?"

"Yes. But not usually along here. I've never seen them. We'll pass through their main area where there are sightings, but we won't be stopping. We'll talk bear etiquette later tonight. You all read the notes I sent you? Good. I know I got bossy fast. But bossy is what you need with bears. Ok. Talk to your tent buddy, decide where to pitch and then come and watch how it goes up. There's a knack to it. Hannibal you're with me."

He heads straight for the spot he always pitches on and then turns to explain the advantages of the location to Hannibal. Away from direct wind, good view of the campsite. No dead fall trees or limbs in range. Near the path to the water seep and up wind of the where the cat holes will be. And east facing. They both turn and watch the others argue about location and

direction and then smile a small conspiracy at each other. Will makes a mental note to remind people they can take their packs off while they have this kind of conversation.

“Sorry to be so directive, but it means we can be sorted quickly. I’ll ask you to choose tomorrow. Can you lengthen all the walking poles to their maximums? It’s marked with tape. Thanks.”

He takes out the main part of the tent from his pack.

“You got the bathtub? Sorry, it’s the ground sheet. The sides come up. So. Bathtub.”

Hannibal finishes the poles and then opens his pack to pull out the small bag, identical to three others that Will had spread round the group.

“Great. Just peg each corner then one in the middle on each side. Now we wait for the others. I’ll get the fire going. You want to get your pad inflated? Might as well. Then you could go and help Jack and Tobias decide not to camp directly under that hemlock. It will just shed all over them.”

He looks up from where he is searching his pack.

“I’m sorry about the tent thing. We can swop out if you really can’t stand the idea.”

Hannibal doesn’t lift his head from where he’s digging his sleeping mat out of his backpack, but Will hears him say.

“Hating it is not the problem.”

Will doesn’t answer him.

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Once the tents are up and everyone has stowed their gear to some extent Will starts on supper, just lentil and bacon stew with rice, followed by cake and custard. The cake will shake to bits in people’s packs so it’s better to eat it the first couple of days out. Jack and Hannibal go for wood with strict instructions to keep the camp in their line of sight at all times and to only bring back fallen limbs.

By the time everyone is sitting down and eating it’s already past five in the early evening. Jack settles back on his folding chair, feet out in front of him.

“See? This was a great idea.”

Will counts it as a win that no one flat out contradicts him then and there.

Abel and Fred use the last of the water to wash up and then make coffee. After they’ve all had at least one cup Will stands and chivvies Randall and Matthew along.

“Come on. Let’s get the water sorted. Before we lose the light. It might take as long as an hour. I’ll show you where the seep is. Bring your trowels too. Ok? Folks I’m going to need

everyone's water bottles."

It takes ten minutes to sort everything out and put all the bottles and filters into bags. Randall's mood seems to have improved somewhat and Will puts this down to the earnest conversation he saw him having with Hannibal over supper. Fuck. Still. Not his fault. He's not a mind reader. Though Hannibal said he would... Will laments his inability to let go of it and tells himself to shut up.

At the seep he explains they can probably fill six or seven bottles at a time if they line them up right. "Then we squeeze the water through the filters, wash the filters through with the syringe, and then line the next lot up. It might take twenty minutes a go. It's a bit time consuming but worth doing this evening. In the morning everyone will just want coffee and breakfast and hot water to wash in."

They get everything set up and then the three men settle down to wait. Conversation is slow but it's not uncomfortable even though he thinks he intercepts a few pointed looks between the other two. But it is just waiting. Where none of you have really chosen to be there, or to spend time together in this way. A few lines of conversation peter out. Eventually though they talk about the send off.

"Tobias' friend seemed ok. Nice that he's looking out for Franklyn."

Randall rolls his eyes.

"Too dependent if you ask me. But Tobes seems happy."

"New thing isn't it?"

"Coming up two years. You know he's a cousin of Jack's Bella. Did you know that?"

Matthew shakes his head.

"Is that how they met?"

"Nah. Franklyn brought some kid in. Runaway. Gone into foster. Got onto Franklyn's patient list. Got in some accident. Tobes was on the rota. Franklyn kept calling about follow up."

Matthew laughs.

"I suppose that's one way to avoid the whole doctor patient thing. I thought he might be interested in Fred."

"Who? The friend? Well. Maybe. But I think Fred has a thing for Mischa. Even if she does pretend-flirt with him all the time."

"I thought you said Fred was scared of her."

Will snorts.

“Mischa? I’d be more worried about Hannibal from what I’ve seen. Which granted isn’t much.”

Randall looks at him, perhaps a little coolly, his eyes just slightly narrowed. Both a possessive look and a predatory one.

“How would you know? You only just met her. Actually you’ve only just met both of them.”

“Ah.” Shit. “Well. Actually I had lunch with Hannibal earlier this week. I met her then. She came home for lunch. We talked about gear. She, err. She came out to the cabin.”

Both Matthew and Randall stare at him.

“Wow. Oh God, at least she’s dedicated.” Matthew laughs. “I wish my sisters were as bothered about my safety and comfort as Mischa is about Hannibal’s.”

Randall smiles.

“Yeah. I know. Don’t think I haven’t realised that I’m going to have to get her on side before it gets truly serious with Hannibal.”

Will doesn’t hear what they say next. He simply exists for a bit. Then he gathers himself up into something resembling a person. Well, with any luck, someone who will manage the next five minutes and not scream and rend his hair or shirt or whatever the fuck it is you rend. He puts the lids on all the bottles that are filled. Bags everything and then hands the bags out between them.

“Ok? Good to go? Great job. I know it’s dull. But worth it. Gets it all done at once.”

He knows he’s talking just for the sake of making some noise but the others answer easily enough.

Back at the campsite, half the group is still sitting around the fire. Will breaks a dry branch over his knee and adds it to the flames, then watches it catch before he bends close to Jack and asks.

“Good job on the wood. Has Hannibal gone for more?”

“He went to get a sweater from your tent. Bit cooler now the sun is going down.”

Will nods and turns to look. Wen is lying down outside and looks up at his approach. He eyes her.

“Don’t think I don’t see how it is.”

He draws up the zip and then hunches down into the doorway of the pyramid. Hannibal is half way through changing his sweater. Arms through the sleeves, but head not yet through the neck hole. Will tries hard not to stare.

“Hannibal. Can I ask you something.”

Hannibal lowers his arms and looks at Will.

“Of course. Are you all right? What is it?”

“Mischa. Yeah? And honestly, kill me now, because I am such a fool and I should have asked, but you should have fucking told me. God. I bet my dad is having a good laugh about this. But anyway...” he swears quietly under his breath.

“Will?”

“Is she your sister?”

Hannibal looks at him in utter incomprehension. The sweater all but forgotten.

“My sister? Of course she’s my sister. She’s here on sabbatical. While I complete the fellowship. She fancied a break... Didn’t I say. Why, who did you...?”

He tails off and watches Will take off his spectacles, then rub both hands over his face and then through his hair. The hand that is clutching his glasses he uses to gesture hopelessly at Hannibal’s throat, still covered, even out here, in the woods with a velvet collar. Simpler in design than his usual one but still bespoke and also, and fuck me now, thinks Will, goddamn embroidered with some crest or other. Same colour thread as the collar so it doesn’t stand out hugely. But. Embroidered.

“Hannibal. For fuck’s sake. I thought she was your wife”

“My wife?” He laughs. And then sobers almost instantly. “Oh. Oh God.”

Will closes his eyes and swears. Quietly, but profusely.

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Chapter 13

Will closes the Velcro tabs that keep the tent door shut and then turns back to Hannibal.

“I can hardly work out where to start on this. And I have to go and talk about dating bears in a minute.”

Hannibal frowns and then his face clears.

“Bear etiquette? Yes I see.” He takes a breath. “Come here.”

Will crawls across the floor of the tent and manages to more or less seat himself in Hannibal’s lap. He slides his arms round his neck and then buries his face there, just breathing him in. Hannibal pulls him closer, tangling them both in his sweater. They sit like that for a few still moments. Hannibal murmurs.

“Lovely as this is, you can’t be comfortable.”

Will whispers back.

“I’m not. It’s killing my back. But I don’t care right this minute. It’s worth it.”

Hannibal laughs. And it’s the most care-free he’s sounded for days. Possibly longer. He shifts Will a little so they are both positioned more easily.

“Better?”

“Not really. But I still don’t care.”

“Are you going to explain?”

Will sighs.

“I am. Mostly later though. Still have to talk bears. Get everyone to their tents. Sort the site out for the morning.”

Hannibal hums a little against the side of Will’s head. Nuzzles there.

“And then you’ll come back to me?”

“There isn’t any question about it. But I should say you’re coming to the bear talk and to help tidy up.”

Hannibal laughs again.

“I see I’m not going to get any perks.”

Will kisses him then. All dirt, and lust, and filthy promise. He moves away by inches and sits back on his knees.

“Oh. I don’t know. That’s on account. Later?”

Hannibal tilts his head appraisingly. Watching the shadows shift across Will’s face in the demi-light of the tent.

“I suppose it depends on how quiet you think you can be.” He laughs a little. Remembering. “Mischa made a joke about ‘no knotting in the woods’. I told her I wouldn’t dream of it.”

He watches Will’s face again. Clearly thinking something through. Will holds out a hand and Hannibal takes it.

“Yes?”

“Not tonight. But tomorrow. There’s a clearing near where we’ll be camping. I have a permanent camp there. I’ve got several dotted around. I’ll show everyone it during the day. It’s close enough that if there was something wrong we’d hear and Wen knows the place. But not too close. We could. If you wanted to.”

“Knot you?”

“And bond us. You said it’s a soulbond. I looked it up. Let’s not fuck about with it, we’ll both be miserable until we do. We’ve already done the desperate pining part. Don’t you think?”

It should be a momentous moment, the decision to bond, something they’ve both been building up to, but really, it’s just arrived, easily, without fanfare or fuss. Something once recognised that is irrefutable. Hannibal sighs. His mother had been affianced to one of his father’s cousins. But they’d met at her engagement party of all things and had known within moments, seconds even. Soulbond. Done. And the laws still existed to protect it, even if someone was already attached or even bonded and mated. He’d only ever met one triad like it. Two of the partners with quadruple rings. One with just a double. Extraordinary. A primary and secondary wouldn’t have suited his parents or him. But. Well. Family could be a contagion for some. He considers Will again.

“I don’t know whether to laugh or lament our misstep. Yes. Yes to all of it. But. For prudence’s sake there are almost certainly some things you should know. That we should talk about.”

“Any wife, or husband, anywhere, any time? Skeletons in the closet? Arrest warrants? Bankruptcy orders? I know you’re right. I do. Really. I’m just so relieved.” He stops then and then smirks a little. “And maybe horny as hell.”

Hannibal smiles. All of the possessiveness and intensity back in the cant of his head and his eyes. He strokes a thumb over the back of Will’s hand. Murmurs darkly.

“Are you wet for me Omega?”

Will nods slowly. Watching Hannibal’s thumb, mesmerised.

“You have no idea. It’s all I’ve thought about.”

“Yes?” Hannibal pauses. “Good.”

Will shifts and knows Hannibal can probably tell how his body responds to him.

“It’s going to get more intense isn’t it? After we’ve bonded?”

Hannibal nods.

“You have plus-suppressants? I’ve assumed that because the colour didn’t come through. Good. But when we’re home? And you can come off them. You will feel desperate for me. And I for you.”

“Rut?”

“And heat. Until we’re mated.”

“Would you rather wait? We can. Until we can do everything together.”

Hannibal smiles.

“My mother would be delighted to throw a bonding party with the intention of creating a rut and heat. So maybe we can avoid that. I’d rather have you here. In the privacy of the woods. At least to bond.”

Will smiles.

“I always say all the best things that have happened to me have happened out of doors. Tomorrow then?”

“And a small something later.”

“And I’ll explain.”

“I sincerely hope so. I still can’t work it out.”

“You will.” Will pushes out of the tent, unsticking the Velcro as he does.

“Oh. Hello.”

Abel grins at him from a few feet away, mischief dancing in his eyes.

“Thank goodness. I was just sent to get you.” He turns back and shouts towards the campfire. “Jack. It’s fine. They’re just coming.”

He smiles at Will as he gets to his feet and Will suddenly realises that he knows. “Sorry. We were just clearing up a few things.”

Abel gently thumps him in the arm. “I heard Hannibal laugh. Well, thank God for that. No, don’t worry I didn’t hear anything else. And I won’t say anything. Come on then. Swipe left

for bears?"

Will smiles. At the fire he sits next to Jack and smiles easily at Tobias and Matthew. Hannibal sits between Fred and Randall. Abel squeezes in beside him which earns him a glare from Randall.

"All right. So. This is basically the 'swipe left for bears' talk. And thanks to Abel for the name. I'm stealing it without reservation."

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"Pass me that, will you?"

Randall looks around him on the floor of the tent. He tries to work out what Matthew is gesturing towards. A pile of stuff he thinks. Just, stuff.

"Be more specific. What exactly?"

"The thing. I don't know. Pump. It's a pump. Doesn't look like one. For the mat. Yellow."

Matthew watches Randall cast around for something yellow in the semi-gloom of their tent. Eventually he finds it and hands it over. Matthew undoes the valve on his mat and pumps some air into it, just to make it a little firmer. Randall looks around again, frowns at his pile of belongings.

"We should put the stuff we both use somewhere sensible. Where we can both get at it. Torches. The pump, and good call by the way I hadn't thought of that. Though my pad says self-inflating. Do you think it is?"

"Don't know. Has it got thicker at all? What did the instructions say?"

Randall rustles around in one of the several dry bags he has accumulated.

"Ok. So. It says, 'Made in China' and 'Enjoy the great outdoors with us.'" He checks both sides of the label. "And it's got cleaning instructions. And that's it. Am I just supposed to know? Don't tell me, you asked our wildman."

Matthew smiles at his colleague.

"Of course I did. He's the one who's the expert. It's why I bought the pump. He said this was the best mat but a pump wouldn't be heavy and would be useful. I leant it to Fred and Abel earlier. So you know. Building up credit."

"What? So they'll cover your shifts? God Matt you're annoyingly on top of this."

"It's kind of interesting. Why not? You have to admit the view was stunning on the way up. If you bothered to look."

He says it with something of a sly smile. And Randall huffs.

“Funny. You think you’re so funny. Look. I want to run something past you. See what you think. The tent arrangements. Right?”

Matthew finishes topping up his mat, tightens the valve, and then wriggles around so that he can get it under him. He stretches out on it.

“This is ok. Yeah. Pretty comfortable. Ok.” He sits up and grabs one of his stuff sacs and turns it inside out, so that there’s a fleecy outer. He starts to stuff spare clothes into it and then tightens the drawstring using the plastic stop-lock to keep it closed. He chucks it down at the head of the mat. Randall watches him.

“Nice?”

“All right actually. I’ve got an inflatable as well but I thought I’d see what this was like. Pretty good. What did you want to ask?”

“You’re fine to share with. And you’ve got a handle on it.” He pauses. “Which actually I can currently see the benefits of. But it occurred to me that with one simple change we could both get what we want.”

Matthew sighs.

“I talked to Will. You know that. After the trip. This is his job. He’s not going to fuck a client in some tent. He’d get a hell of a rep if he did that.”

“Just because you’ve decided to keep it in your pants. Doesn’t mean we all have to.”

Matthew eyes him.

“Don’t get pissed with me about Hannibal. Seems like he’s planning on keeping it in his pants too. Look. Randall. Let’s not fight about this. I’ll ask Will. But I think it’s unlikely. He seems to get on ok with Hannibal. And frankly he’s been in such a fuck off mood the last week I’m just glad he’s not bitten my head off.”

“He’s fine with me.”

“He’s got an attachment with you! Of course he’s fine with you. Don’t be a shit about it. You know the deal.” He grumbles a little as he changes his shirt for a slate blue silk sleep one. It suits him. He rolls his shoulders. “Anyway. Why haven’t your eyes changed.”

He hears Randall sigh. Yeah, perhaps he could be a bit nicer about it, it’s almost certainly bothering or upsetting him.

“I don’t know. It’s been a week. I keep thinking I can feel it. But it might be why he’s been so discomforted, you know. It’s shit if it’s unrequited. I tried to reassure him earlier.”

“And I bet he was just kind and understanding about it wasn’t he? Yeah. Sorry. Ok. So is he ok?”

“He says so. But his eyes have come in really strongly. Did you see? He’s taken his lenses out. He said the list suggested not to wear them out here.”

Matthew sighs again. Really he thinks his friend is in way too deep. It’s not his responsibility if Hannibal’s eyes change and his didn’t. It happens. It’s shit, but it happens. And maybe his can’t anyway.

“All right. Look. I’ll ask Will. See what he says about it. I’m not promising. But I’ll ask. Anyway. I might not fuck him, but I’d like to talk to him. He’s got a lot of incredible experiences out here. He’s walked all over. Did you know that? Europe. South Asia. New Zealand. Amazing.”

Randall looks at Matthew. Now changed out of his day clothes and into his sleep wear and inside his sleeping quilt. Arms extended over his head.

“When did you get ready for bed? Fuck. God. I can’t get the hang of this.”

“Don’t be stupid. It’s our first night. It all takes time. Build a routine, learn new habits.”

“Did the wildman tell you that too? I can just hear him now. Shit. Ok. Torches in the middle, pump, extra blankets, toilet paper, water bottles. Anything else?”

“Go to sleep Randall. We’ll work it out. Stop being a sodding perfectionist. Sometimes you don’t know what you need until you need it. I’m going to put earplugs in now. So, you know, I can’t hear you.”

“I fucking hate you right now.”

“I did hear that. Night. Sleep well. If you get up to piss don’t forget to follow the markers. And no bears. God that was funny.”

His friend doesn’t answer and by the time Matthew is asleep he’s not sure whether Randall has managed to sort himself out or not.

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Hannibal lies in his sleeping bag, hands clasped on his stomach. He’s rearranged the two mats to lie right beside each other. And has spread the large fleece blanket Will has packed across the two bedrolls. Wen is lying with her paws crossed, head resting on them, on the far side of Will’s space. He suspects she’s feigning sleep, waiting for Will to come back to the tent. He knows the feeling.

He’s surprised at just how tired he is now. The day’s excitements, the stress of the endless stream of misery that led up to the evening’s revelations, all this very fresh air. He yawns and Wen immediately does the same. Ahh. Not asleep. He reaches out a hand to scritch at her ears. She’s makes a deep contented noise, far down in her throat, a rumble of pure pleasure. He knows how that feels too. He yawns again. He could just close his eyes. For a moment or two.

Out by the fire-pit, Will is just re-setting the fire so that whoever is on wood duty in the morning can get it going easily. Coffee, tea, porridge are all fire dependent and there are no sockets out here. He'd explained to Tobias about how to tidy the camp and how to put the small luminous markers into the ground to show the way to the cat holes. And back. Which is the crucial thing really. A small thing. A simple thing. How not to get lost in the woods. Luminosity is your friend.

He stands and stretches. As he walks round the camp, listening close to each tent for any conversation or worry or disquiet, he tightens a guy rope on one of the pyramids. On another he checks a loop come loose from a peg. In one tent he hears the tail end of a conversation, quiet, not likely to disturb the others. He glances at his watch, the hands glowing a faint green. Just before midnight.

By the time he gets back to the tent and unzips it as quietly as possible Hannibal is already asleep.

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In the morning Hannibal is woken when Will puts his head in the door of the tent.

"Trust me. You slept ok. And I've brought you coffee. Fred's already up. He and Matt are on wood so he got the fire going. You're doing water with Abel. Which means checking the cat holes later before we leave, and collecting the markers. Ok. I'll remind you at breakfast. Oh and by the way. Morning." He ducks out of the tent and then pokes his head back through. "The coffee is a perk. Just so you know."

By the time he's up Tobias and Jack have made porridge and are just sorting out dried fruit to soak during the day's walk. Something for supper. Abel stands by the fire, lifts a hand and greets him, and then holds out his hand for the empty coffee cup.

"God he's cheerful in the morning. And I don't think Matthew and Randall are awake. Will you do the honours? I'll pour you another cup. You sleep ok?"

"Yes. I think I did. Though Wendigo snores. Or possibly Will, but I think it was her."

Abel squats down by the fire and uses his sleeve stretched over his hand to pick up the coffee pot nestled in the embers. He pours coffee into his own mug and then into Hannibal's. He flips the lid back on the pot to check if it needs re-filling. Probably do three more cups.

"Oh. Yeah. You get the wolf. I hadn't thought of that. What's that like?"

"Quiet, and affectionate, and makes it warmer in the tent."

"This is the dog we're talking about. Right?"

Hannibal smiles. He draws Abel a little off to the side.

"We talked. I think everything is resolved." He pauses and takes a long mouthful of coffee. God that's good. Bitter nectar. Sent from the gods. "You guessed didn't you?"

Abel smiles.

“Well it wasn’t Randall was it? Though I think he thinks it is. Will’s eyes haven’t changed. Which surprises me. Unless they can’t. He’s a non-secretor isn’t he. Oh wait. Lenses?”

“And plus-suppressants.”

Abel looks at him.

“For the colour? But. Oh. God.” He looks around to make sure no-one is near. “So it is a soulbond. He is an Omega.” He glances round again. “Look. I did wonder. After last week. Well. The day you met actually. I mentioned it to Jack.” He catches the look on Hannibal’s face. “Jack said we should say nothing. He’s right. We don’t need to. It’s no one’s business. Will he take his lenses out?”

“I think he planned to last night. I’m somewhat embarrassed to admit I fell asleep before he came back to the tent.”

Abel bursts out laughing.

“You’re joking. Oh that’s just peachy. Oh Hannibal. God. What it is to be middle-aged. God. Come on. We’ve got to do water. Do you want porridge before or after. Will says we could take our breakfast with us while we fill the bottles. He’s shown me where the seep is. Did I tell you he’s impossibly chirpy in the mornings. Damn.”

“How delightful. All right. Show me breakfast and water. Is there enough coffee for another cup?”

“I’ll get it. You go and wake up Randall and Matthew. Say something pithy.”

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“Good job. It’s only taken three hours to eat breakfast and pack up and stow everything. That’s not bad for a first morning.”

There are groans from the group now stood round the smouldering remains of the morning’s fire. Will takes pity on them. “I mean it. I sometimes plan for lunch at the same place if the group have got in a tangle. It’s fine. Abel you got the cat hole markers, we’ll need them tonight? Great. Tobias, the dried fruit? Ok. Good. Matthew? If you see any dead wood about the size of my forearm round or smaller let me know, we might try and pick up enough for lunch on the way. We’ll stop in about two and half hours. Ok?”

Abel gives Hannibal a look. He thinks he mouths. “Chirpy.” At him.

The walk is relatively level. Will stops at one point, puts his bag on the ground, and strips a branch of needles. He passes the handful round. Everyone sniffs it. It’s fresh, smells of pine and sap, and something resinous.

“This is Western Hemlock. It makes a great tea. Not to be confused with the hemlock that killed Socrates. That’s a green herbaceous plant, looks a bit like wild carrot, same family. Don’t make tea from that. It won’t go well. There isn’t actually any on our route. Not that I’ve seen anyway. Lots of this though. We’ll make some over lunch. We won’t depend on anything in the way of wild edibles, it’s too early in the spring for most things. And I don’t like to strip an area bare before the season’s really got going. But there’s a few things. There’s usually a good crop of scarlet elf caps near one of our planned overnights. We might try those. Matt? Question?”

“Could you live out here? If you had to? With nothing?”

Will laughs. He shifts his backpack up onto his shoulders again.

“There’s whole businesses built off teaching people how to do just that. If I absolutely had to? Yes. Winter would be a bit grim. But. Depending on what time of year I got started, yes. Probably.”

They set off again and he and Matthew fall into a conversation about wilderness survivalism.

Abel pokes Jack in the side with the handle of his walking pole.

“We could do that next year. If this one goes well. A week in the woods, with nothing but our wits.”

Jack makes a face at him.

“That presumes some of us have got wits in the first place. God. This pack is killing me.”

“Stop for a moment. Let me look. Yeah. Take it off. You’ve twisted one of the straps.”

They spend maybe a minute sorting Jack’s pack out. By the time they’ve managed it he settles it on his shoulders and rolls his neck.

“Much better. Thanks. Hey. Shit.” He looks around. “Where’d everyone go?”

Abel looks around, turning on the spot. He can’t even hear anyone. Just a silent wood. No bird song. Probably because of all the noise they’d been making.

“Eerie isn’t it. You get so used to there being some kind of background hum. Here there just..nothing. Emptiness.”

“You think they’ll notice we’re not with them?”

Abel looks around again. A little more disquieted. He can hear something in the undergrowth a little upwind of where they are. Not too big he thinks. Probably. How would he know. But it sounds close to the ground. Doesn’t it? He thinks so.

“You hear anything?”

Jack shakes his head, shifts from one foot to the other. A small ripple of unease tingling his spine.

“What should we do.”

“Wait. Maybe even sit. But certainly wait.”

They stop talking then and listen. Slowly, the noise of the wood reasserts itself. A bird. Insects buzzing. A huff of something larger, maybe. A sough of wind in the branches.

And then it’s Will.

“Here you are! Good. I wondered if you’d just stopped. Come on. Excellent lesson for everyone. You ok?”

Abel nods. Not exactly shaken, but maybe reminded that for all its beauty, for all the emotion it invokes in the heart and soul, the woods have no feelings whatsoever for them. It is not a benign place. It is neutral. Perhaps for Will it feels like an ally, perhaps if you know it, or understand it, you can at least co-exist with it. But that is only because he has earned and learnt its secrets. Shared them.

Abel does shiver now. “Yeah.” He manages. “Jack’s pack. How far did you get? Before you realised?”

“That you weren’t with us? Maybe a minute or two. But Wen always knows if we’ve got stragglers. She wouldn’t have left you behind. Even if I was off on one.”

Abel and Jack exchange looks.

“Moral is? If we gotta stop, we tell you?”

“Sure. And we’ll do map reading straight after lunch. Make sure you can all navigate your way between landmarks. Not depend on the path flashes.” He gestures up to the blue paint marking on a nearby trunk. They hadn’t seen it. Hadn’t thought to look. “No pissing around with them. They’re not entirely reliable anyway. True north. All the good stuff. Plan?”

Jack looks around him at the conifer and the broadleaf, the impossible crowding of living things trying to reach the light. Competing, even here, for resources. It’s possible he shudders.

“There are landmarks?”

Will laughs.

“Everywhere.”

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Tobias looks at Jack and passes him another bowl. Jack passes it back once it’s been filled. He hands it up to Fred who makes a surprised face.

“Looks good. Thanks.”

Tobias smiles vaguely and looks back at Jack.

“No one else to come. Just you and me.”

Jack fills the last two bowls in the pile and then sits back on the tree stump he’s commandeered, wiggles to get a little more comfortable.

“Scared the pants off me. I’ll admit it now. Thought we’d be stuck there. Fuck.”

He digs into the dried fish gumbo he and Tobias have put together from the recipe and ingredients Will had given them. He talks around his next mouthful.

“This is good. Thought I’d be eating dried fruit and peanuts for the next two weeks and then just sit down and die.”

Tobias smiles slightly.

“I guess that’s why it’s called trail mix.”

Jack snorts a small laugh. Making a concerted effort to recover his usual dry humour.

“Yeah? Is it. Fuck. Wilderness is great. Until it fucking kills you.”

For all that Tobias is Bella’s cousin he and Jack aren’t incredibly close. Friendly rather than actual friends he thinks. Though they’ve always got on well, even after Jack got promoted.

“It doesn’t kill you. You just die there.”

“Yeah? That’s what Abel said. It doesn’t care either way. This isn’t Disney.”

Tobias laughs then.

“Nor the Lord of the Rings. No. It’s easy to anthropomorphise everything. Were you really worried?”

“Coupla minutes. Will wasn’t a shit about it. Says people do it all the time. It’s why we’ve got the cat hole markers. People wander off to take a leak, can’t find their way back. He says people are more careful at night. But. All the same. And they don’t think to shout. We didn’t. Neither Abel or me. We just goddam listened. See if we could hear you guys.”

Tobias scrapes the last of his bowlful into his mouth.

“High calories. How much we using?”

Jack smiles.

“4000 calories a day? Maybe more? I guess he’s worked it all out.” He lifts his chin to indicate Will, sitting on the other side of the clearing talking to Abel and Matthew. “I like him. He’s a good guy.”

“Matthew’s interested.”

Jack eyes him and puts down his bowl and spoon on the ground.

“Oh that’s just marvellous. First Randall and Hannibal. And then, after last week, well yes.. and now those two. Great. Marvellous. Fantastic. Anything you want to tell me Toby? Secretly got the hots for Fred?”

“No.” He smiles. “But I think a friend of mine does.”

Jack makes a small noise.

“God. I’m a shit. That’d be great for him. Someone he’d like? Do you think. It must be pretty crap.”

Tobias nods.

“I know he’s a bit of a dick. He is. But, well. Even dicks deserve happiness. Some of the time at least, don’t you think?”

“Yeah. He does. He is. But he does. All right. We making tea or coffee or what?”

“Hot water. Custard. Coffee. Tea. Chocolate. The works. Last of the cake. Who’s on water?”

“Abel and Hannibal. Where is Hannibal? We need enough for washing up too.”

Tobias gestures with his head, behind them.

“Talking to Randall. Or Randall is talking to him. One of those.”

Jack sighs.

“For fuck’s sake. I should have hidden off the path when Will came back. Take my chances on the peanuts and dried fruit.”

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Fred steps to the side of the path.

“Damn. What kind of thing shat this?”

He hunches down and then squats on his haunches and looks up at Hannibal. Hannibal shakes his head.

“Something big? Mammal. Carnivore I’d say. From the small bones.”

“Is it recent?”

“Dried out a little. I don’t know.”

Matthew comes up behind them and leans on his poles. The path has finally levelled out after a descent that's gone on for what feels like a long while. He looks over Fred's shoulder.

"You ok Fred? What is it ? Oh. Wolf scat. I saw some earlier. Will says there is a pack hunkered down around here somewhere. I guess he'll brief us at some point. He says the wardens report it's been giving trouble."

Hannibal looks at him.

"Does he?"

Matthew smiles. He's more or less resolved to try and get along better with Hannibal. Maybe they just got off on the wrong foot. Maybe he can make a bit of an effort not to be such a fuck in general. He's made an effort with Randall today and that's paid off. Why not Hannibal too?

"Abel and I talked to him at lunchtime. He's a nice guy. Easy to talk to. Knows his stuff. You're getting on him with ok? Aren't you? In the tent. Because if you're not, I don't mind swapping."

Hannibal looks at him and considers how best to parse an answer which is basically 'fuck off and leave my mate alone'.

"That's generous. I believe we are doing quite well at the moment. Thank you Matthew. I appreciate you may be also doing this for our mutual friend."

"I said I'd ask Will. But. Same thing isn't it. Asking you? In effect?"

Hannibal smiles.

"Yes. I think it is. But, do feel free to check with him too."

Matthew laughs.

"You're fine. I get it. Randall's being a bit intense about it." He glances at Fred. "Can I ask you something?"

It takes him a moment's pause but Hannibal eventually nods.

"Of course."

He watches Matthew suck in a breath, perhaps debating how to phrase what ever it is he wants to ask a little less bluntly than he is prone.

"Last week. Your eyes changed. I'm sorry. I know it's rude of me to ask. But you're not wearing lenses now. Is that because of the woods? Will says he never wears lenses out here. Too much danger of grit or soot or something behind them. He's taken his out. Hard to see his ring. Heterochromia Iridium probably, plus being a non-secretor. But I think he has one. Anyway. Not the point. Your ring? Is it Randall?"

Fred suddenly laughs.

“Randall? Surely not? I can’t see that at all. Honestly. I mean. He’s fine. But with Hannibal. And Randall’s eyes didn’t change. So. Matthew. Honestly. Really. Is that what Randall thinks?”

Matthew looks at him carefully.

“It is what he thinks. And maybe his eyes don’t show an attachment. Doesn’t mean it isn’t there. You know that Fred.”

Fred immediately stops laughing.

“You’re quite right. Barney and I never changed. Don’t have the gene for it. But I felt it when he died. Terrible thing.” He looks at Matthew’s sad face. “Oh it’s all right. I can talk about it now. Sometimes. Anyway. So maybe he has. But Hannibal?”

They both turn and look at him. He slowly shakes his head.

“If Randall does indeed have an attachment then I regret to say it is not a requited one. It isn’t him. Of that I am sure.”

Matthew looks at him in consternation.

“Have you told him that. From what he said.. I thought.” He sees the look of concern on Hannibal’s face. “Ahh shit. You have told him. He doesn’t believe you.”

“I fear he doesn’t wish to.”

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Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Yup. NSFW A/B/O sex. Which takes a surprising amount of time to edit.

Randall shrugs. Of the group he's the one who knows most about map reading using a compass and dead reckoning. He looks around them into the dark of the tress beyond the pathway.

"Not quite the same. But. Not so dissimilar. Sailing mainly. As a kid. My parents have a boat. They're the outdoorsy types."

"Hiking too?"

He digs a toe of his boot into the soft earth. Remembering. "Not here. Europe. 'Between the Woods and the Water'. That kind of thing. Adventures."

Will smiles quietly. He knows the book and the lifestyle it signifies. Has read a whole swathe of admirers and imitators too.

"Did they make you do the whole overland business?"

Randall actually looks at him properly and smiles at him.

"It rather felt like maybe I stopped them doing it quite the way they imagined. Anyway means I can read a map. Upside down and standing on my head."

The group spend an hour getting better from whatever point they've started from in terms of knowledge. All of them seem to know the basics. 'Seem to' being the operative words in Will's experience. Still, after Abel and Jack's escapade in the morning no one questions its worth and by the time they reach the semi permanent camp Will wants to show them they've all had a chance to work in pairs and threes to navigate for the group for upwards of an hour.

"Good job! Great. We'll do more of this tomorrow and the next day and gradually each of you will take turns at plotting our journey for a morning or afternoon. You'll have someone to back you up and test your thinking against. And I won't abandon you. Randall? Maybe you'll help too, no point in testing you on something you're clearly on top of."

Randall nods. It's been all right. As afternoons go. And he'd been pleasantly surprised when Will had been keen to make use of his expertise. Nice of him, he thinks. Making an effort. Though he supposes that really it's him that's kept his distance. There's something about Will Graham that he's not entirely sure of. Still. Maps. Don't show the territory, just the landscape. He's surmised Will is well aware of that.

The semi permanent camp Will leads them to has the expected fire pit but everyone is surprised when he pushes aside what had looked to be some fallen dead wood to expose what can only be described as a door. He slides it across with a sharp tug. Inside they can see it's a long wooden tube lying on its side, like a wooden drainage pipe. Large enough for someone to sit up in. There are storage nets hanging from the roof and shelves at the far end with what look like closed up metal decommissioned ammo boxes sitting on them. On the floor is some foam matting. Will looks round the group and smiles at their bemused expressions.

"They're basically emergency bivouacs. But slightly more permanent. I've got three set up. All on my land. Well. One's a bit disputed but as the Rangers and Wardens all use it sometimes no one complains. There's dry clothes and dried food. And a few blankets. I've slept here any number of times. Anyone want to try?" He glances around the group and then up at the sky. "Don't be shy. And then we're going to walk quick smart to where we're camping tonight. It's about fifty minutes away. It's going to rain. In about ninety minutes. I'd like us to be set up. Have dinner going. Tobias? You look like you're a sound volunteer. Either that or everyone else took a step back."

Tobias smiles quietly and then hunkers down, resting on the lip of the bivouac. He fumbles his boots off and then wriggles round and goes in backwards. When he's in he turns to lie flat on his back, and then turns onto his front. He smiles up at the group as he props himself up on his forearms.

"It's good. Comfortable. Dry too. We're going to make shelters, aren't we. The video had the kids jumping on one."

Will smiles broadly.

"We are. Less solid than this. But still strong enough for you to sit on. I hope. But this is more like a barrel sunk in the ground on its side."

He's about to add something when Hannibal suddenly laughs. "Diogenes. It's Diogenes' barrel. Even down to the dog." He clicks his fingers at Wen who snuffles a small bark. She lets her ears be fondled by him, loving the attention from the Alpha her Will smells of.

Several of the group laugh then. Fred looks a little doubtful about it. "Really? Is that true?"

Will gives Wendigo a look but smiles at Frederick. "It's the story isn't it? Though the original text suggests it was what ever they stored beer in. Which was probably great terracotta amphora I'd guess. For the period. But yes. That was the inspiration. There're some great paintings of it. Though he had lots of dogs Hannibal. So not entirely the same."

Hannibal smiles at him a little fondly.

"I'm sure you would too."

Will tips a hand to Wendigo. "She's enough dog for me. Ok. Tobias? Come on. Comfy though it is. Ready? Eighty minutes until the rain now."

They follow him along the path discussing the barrel and what they'd glimpsed inside. It slips into a conversation about how little you can actually survive comfortably with. Matthew gets them talking about a challenge he saw on a bushcraft website. What five items would you take with you on a trip. Jack's delighted when it turns into a conversation about how if they bonded together and cooperated with one another they'd have forty items between them to choose from.

At the site they'll use for the night Will reminds them all about locations to pitch and which direction is East. He turns to Hannibal.

"Your choice. I'll sleep wherever you decide."

He flushes, just the slightest amount of heat across his cheekbones. And it triggers a small spark of arousal in Hannibal, tugging at his hind brain and the base of his spine.

Will looks up, above the skyline, exposing the line of his throat.

"We made good time. Fifteen minutes until the rain. As soon as you're pitched I need the wood people and the cooks. Don't forget to wear your rain gear. Hannibal? Let's get it up."

Damn it. He thinks. He better watch it. Fucking subconscious.

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Jack pushes his hood back, the rain having eased again. He pokes at the fire. Just about holding its own agains the drizzle. Tobias reads the laminated recipe card out loud.

'Supper -

Couscous, dried veg, and dried chicken, tahini and lemon sauce

Dried fruit reconstituted, custard, crumble topping.. I.e. any cake leftovers

Couscous - cover with boiling water, chuck in the dried veg (onions, tomatoes, peppers, mushrooms, olives, sultanas), add the dried shredded chicken. Add the spice mix. Cover. Leave it alone for twenty minutes. Leave it alone. Use the time to make the tahini and lemon sauce.

Sauce - half a jar of tahini, well mixed so the paste and oil has combined. Add enough lemon juice until it's emulsified. To emulsify shake real hard WITH THE LID ON TIGHT. Or stir.

Now check the couscous. Water all absorbed? Good job. Add sauce liberally. Make more if needed.

Dried fruit - you remembered to add boiling water this morning yeah? And carried it all day? Good job.

Custard - powder, boiling water, stir. Done. Plus cake crumbs if they didn't all get scoffed already.'

He laughs.

“Honestly I feel like Will thought of everything. Down to the food cards. These are great.”

“Well, you like to cook.”

“I do. And everything labelled and in ziplocks? Genius? I’d have said fool proof. Unless someone burns the water.”

Jack’s about to query it when he realises Tobias is joking. They set to putting the meal together and do spend the full twenty minutes stipulated on the card getting the sauce to Tobias’s satisfaction. Tastes fantastic though. Even in the rain which has come and gone and come back again. When they’re all eating Fred asks about the food.

“Am I on tomorrow? I’m not great. But I can do French toast for breakfast. Are there eggs?”

Will finishes his mouthful. Doesn’t say the most obvious thing, the slightly scathing thing, though he thinks it might occur to a few of the group.

“No eggs, but I’ve got pancake mix. You any good at pancakes.”

“Breakfast?”

“Lunch. Ok?”

Fred nods and then passes his bowl for seconds.

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Abel laughs again. Then he checks to make sure he hasn’t jogged any of the bottles precariously balanced to fill from the thin sheet of water trickling down the rock. He can’t tell if it’s mostly rain going straight in or is actually coming from the stream above.

“His wife? That’s rich? How did you come up with that?”

Hannibal leans back against the boulder and smiles.

“Tell him Will.”

Will looks up from where he’s crouched down filtering the first group of bottles.

“Yeah. He’s laughing now. Ok. So. Three things. And I’d like to say in my defence that it was because they were in combination. In isolation I’d have come to a different conclusion. But, the surnames, the collars, and the painting in the living room.”

Abel snorts.

“I think I want to say something like ‘hoist on your own petard’ Hannibal. That’s actually very funny. Though I appreciate it’s been a crap few days. Will you tell the others?”

“Maybe closer to the end of the trek. We managed a brief conversation earlier. Hannibal?”

“It would mean revealing Will is an Omega and I’m not sure how that will sit with everyone.”

Abel wags his head from side to side.

“I know. It shouldn’t matter. But it might. Though, really, I’d be sorry if any of our colleagues were that prejudiced. But. Well. Fair enough. Jack knows. I told Hannibal that, did he tell you Will?”

Will sighs and nods.

“That’s half the group already. And I might have to explain to Matthew. Actually... damn. Fuck. I am so stupid.”

Abel smirks just a little.

“Is this another thing where we all go ‘ahh, well, that makes sense now’ after the event.”

“Yeah. Maybe. I just realised. The suppressants don’t show the colour of the ring. But they can’t hide a ring. You can see it if you look closely enough. I’ve got weird eyes anyway but it is obvious. And I can’t wear lenses out here. Well I could, but frankly that’s a huge pain.”

Abel laughs and then stops.

“Oh.” He looks at Hannibal who looks as though he too has caught up with what Will is saying. “Oh.” He gives them both a sly look. “You were thinking of bonding. Out here. In the woods. Oh wait. Back at your camp?”

Will sighs again and looks at Abel. Then he gestures between him and Hannibal who has stopped lounging.

“Do you mind if we finish the water off. I think Hannibal and I should talk about it.”

Abel smiles. “Oh don’t mind me. Go right ahead.” He sees the look on Hannibal’s face. “Relax my friend. I’m just teasing. Will, give me those bottles. I’ll take them back. I can always make an excuse if someone is too nosey.”

They gather the filled and filtered water bottles and Will packs them into two bags which Abel takes and then slings one over each shoulder. He smiles at them both.

“You’ve got time you know. I know it might not feel like it. See you later.”

They hear him whistling a small tune a little off key as he heads off down the path back to the camp. An unmistakeable route. Hannibal turns and looks at Will.

“We should wait then. Until next week. I don’t think anyone will really mind. But. Well. Technically I’m your client.”

Will comes to lean against the rock beside him, he links their hands. He stares out across the small grassy area to the path that will take them to camp. The one Abel just walked along. It’s

quiet. No one near. He looks up. The rain has been holding off for the last half hour. After supper everyone rushed to get their chores done before it came down again.

“It’s going to rain again. Harder. Later.”

“Will?”

“I still want you to knot me. I can’t bear it any longer.”

Hannibal turns and then moves to press Will against the rock-face. He kisses Will lightly, one hand still linked with Will’s.

“I’m not unaffected by your need. I can sense it. Inside. It tugs at my consciousness. Nor am I immune to the effect you have. When I see you with the others. Laughing. Talking. I have to watch what I say, how I behave.”

“You’re thinking of me.”

Hannibal takes a breath. “I’m somewhat embarrassed to say my head is almost constantly filled with images of me fucking you. How you would look by firelight, with my come sliding down your face in the rain, with my hands in your hair as I use your mouth. What you look like when I bring you to orgasm just on my knot. How you taste. The tenderness of your skin at your rim. The sounds you will make when I catch on your hole. How desperate you will be. How wet. How you will burn.”

Will smiles, tries to suppress a small laugh. He looks a little rueful. “I already am.”

Hannibal smiles down at him and lowers his head again. As he slips his tongue inside Will’s mouth Will brings his spare hand up to cup the back of Hannibal’s head. He sucks on Hannibal’s tongue as he strokes inside. Then he moans as Hannibal slides his other hand down the front of his pants inside his underwear. Hannibal fondles him gently to begin with. Slides his thumb over and over the slit in Will’s cock. Spreads the wetness around. Then he slips his fingers down the shaft and reaches to the soft skin behind. Male Omegas don’t have a scrotal sack. Evolution has been kind and not graced them with something unnecessary. No semen, so no testes. But they do have very developed prostates and anal glands. Plenty of slick to be encouraged. And though they’ve no sperm they have plenty of ejaculate too. Will makes a desperate noise when Hannibal circles his hole with two fingertips.

“You’re very wet. Is this good?”

“You know it is. God. More. Please.”

Hannibal smiles against his mouth and makes the kiss wetter and deeper. He slips his fingers inside. Will is already sopping wet, stimulated by their words, the attachment, the soulbond yearning for them to deepen and cement the connection. They will ache for each other until they do. As Hannibal slowly draws his fingers in and out, he lets go of Will’s hand and rests on Will’s hip to guide his thrust against the push of Hannibal’s fingers inside him. He strokes against Will’s prostate and fucks him harder with his fingers when Will begs.

“So lovely.” He murmurs. “Shall I make you wait? I’d like to use my mouth on you?”

Will looks at him as he pulls back a little still grazing his prostate with every few strokes of his fingers. He can’t help the spontaneous arch of his back as he gets close. Hannibal leans a little and sucks a bruise into the skin at Will’s throat above the gland there.

“My mouth?”

Will nods urgently. Beyond words, as Hannibal keeps his hand on his hip and slides the pants off him. Just down his thighs. So his cock is free of the fabric. He kisses Will again.

“Good Omega.”

Then he bends and takes Will in his mouth. Keeps his fingers working. He looks up to see that Will has tipped his head back, closed his eyes, his bruised bonding gland glistening with sweat, in the dim evening light. Perfect. He sucks and swallows and then hums and curls both fingers again and Will shudders, and then comes in his throat. The noise he makes Hannibal will hold like a secret thing in his heart. He holds Will to him when he slumps against him. Utterly fucked out. Hannibal strokes his face, kisses him, Will chasing his own salty release on his tongue. Moaning softly still. He pulls his fingers out. Wipes them carelessly on his rainwear.

“And later I will knot you. Come in you. Mark you further. I will take you on your hands and knees and you will know me.”

Will looks at him, still a little dizzy with lust.

“I need you to fuck me. Please. God. I need that. Fuck. I’m not like this. Not usually.”

He hangs himself round Hannibal’s neck and clings. Hannibal strokes his back, holds him tenderly.

“I know. Neither of us are used to it. It’s partly the chemical changes. Knotting will help. And when we bond we’ll both feel relieved. More settled.”

“I know that’s the theory. It’s just. God. It’s terrible. Waiting. Aren’t you feeling like you might burst?”

Hannibal is quiet for a moment.

“I don’t yet have the words for how I feel.”

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Fred pulls a long dead branch from the undergrowth and hands it back to Randall. He continues to tug, intent on another piece of dead wood caught by the bracken.

“It’s a little damp but if we stack it close by the fire it should dry. I think. Don’t you?”

“I suppose. How much do we have dry?”

“Will says we have enough for the morning, almost. If this dries out tonight we should be ok. Are you on breakfast?”

“I think so. How are you doing Fred? Everything all right. Is the tent with Abel going ok?”

Fred looks at him gratefully. If it had been Jack he was sharing with he’d be jumping at the offer, but actually Abel is alright.

“Are you looking to swop out? Matthew was asking Hannibal earlier.” He stops what he’s doing with the wood and then wipes his hands on the thighs of his over-trousers. “I never want to see so much nylon in my life again.” He stands. “If we pull from here, both of us, I think we’ll get this out. Ready?” Randall drops the wood he is carrying and helps pull this final bough out from where it’s stuck.

“I thought Matt was going to ask Will. What did Hannibal say?”

“Thanks. Ok. Good. Hannibal? He said he was doing all right with Will. But to check with him too.”

He grabs the branch and some of the wood that Randall has dropped. Perhaps even debates the wisdom of what he is about to ask.

“I’m sorry Randall. Is it painful?”

Randall stares at him and asks slowly.

“What do you mean?” He narrows his eyes just a little, tilts his head and Fred rushes to explain, to not upset his colleague.

“Look. When Barney and I were together, neither of us had our eyes change. Genetic, isn’t it? But you feel it don’t you? An attachment?”

Randall nods at him. Frowns slightly, and then his face clears.

“Yes. I can feel it. But it doesn’t show. But at least his changed. That’s something. A relief I suppose.”

They begin to drag and half carry their prize back to the campsite.

“Has he attached to you? I thought there was some question about it. I’m sorry. I don’t mean to pry.”

Randall stops and closes his eyes.

“I think he’s just apprehensive. It’s a big change for him. An attachment? I don’t think he anticipated it. Almost inconvenient.”

“Yes. I see. These sudden things. I said that to Will earlier.”

Randall opens his eyes and gets going again.

“Yes? How do you mean?”

“His eyes are ringed. You saw that? He’s taken his lenses out. But he wasn’t before. When Jack and I went out to meet with him. Couple of weeks ago. So. You know it can happen at any time. To anyone. Love is like that. Attachment too. I don’t know if he told Matthew.”

“Matthew?”

“Don’t you think so? Maybe?”

Doubtfully Randall replies. “Maybe. Yes... maybe.” He takes a sharp breath. “We should get this back. And Fred. Don’t tell anyone yeah? It’s his business. It’s already messy.”

Fred smiles at him.

“I am the very soul of discretion.”

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As Will predicted the rain starts to come down harder again after everyone has done chores, now drinking tea or chocolate or coffee by the sputtering fire, and Will quickly marshals them.

“All right. Who was on wood. Matt can you get one of the small tarps just inside mine and Hannibal’s tent door. On the right. Folded up small. Thanks. Everyone? It’s a bit before 9. Breakfast at 8. Wood and fire people tomorrow, Jack and Hannibal. Water Randall and Tobias. Matthew, you on tidy up and me and Fred on wash up and cooking, as you asked. I know. Some of you are starting to repeat tasks? I think. Not to worry. We’ll do a tally in a couple of days. Make sure no one is doing all the cushy numbers. People on wood need to have the fire going at 7:30 ok? Sorry. If it’s wet we’ll use the stoves and you can have a lie in until 7:45. I know. I’m generous like that. Thanks Matt.” He bends and tucks the tarp he’s given around the wood pile, keeping the ends away from the fire now spitting more in the rain. “Ok. Everyone take shelter. I’ve cards if anyone wants them. The pyramids take four easily to hang out in. Try not to get everything wet. Especially sleeping bags.”

No one waits around. Fred ends up in Jack and Tobias’ tent and they all squeeze up to make room for Matthew.

“Abel?”

“Talking to Randall. Something about the map reading. Abel couldn’t get it. Randall is enjoying being the expert.”

Jack laughs.

“Good for him. Ok. I’ve got a small bottle of something, for just such moments as this. Toby? Got a couple of mugs? And I’ve got cards too.”

Tobias finds both his and Jack’s mugs and then grins when Matthew pulls a small collapsible leaf mug from his pocket.

“Don’t tell me. Will said they come in useful.”

“Right though wasn’t he. Silicon. Barely weighs a thing.”

Fred makes a small disconsolate noise and Jack holds up the bottle.

“That’s what the lid’s for Fred. No worries.”

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Hannibal crawls into the tent and then curls around so he is seated cross legged on Will’s mat, he sighs.

“I suppose this has put a dampener on our prospects for the evening?”

Will pushes into the tent behind him.

“I’m just going to dry Wen.” He spends the next five minutes rubbing her with a micro-towel that has her name stitched into one corner. Will sees Hannibal looking. “Present from Abigail few Christmases ago.” He makes soothing noises at her and eventually smooths down her mat and pats it. “Good girl. We’re going out. You can come and find me. Yes. But stay. Stay.” She settles down. She and Will have played this game before. Where he goes off, and she has to wait and wait and wait until she has almost forgotten and then she goes and finds him.

Hannibal strokes her ears. She grumbles at him.

“She knows to look for you?”

“Yes. Especially if one of the others is looking for me. I think dad had a Lassie obsession as a kid. He worked really hard on training her.”

“You didn’t have dogs as a child?”

“Moved around too much. Wouldn’t have been fair. Soon as we could though.”

“So. We are still going out?”

Will laughs.

“Did you think a little rain would stop us? No. God. It didn’t earlier. It’s actually to our advantage. Everyone will stay close to camp. And it dampens the sound. We already know neither of us can keep quiet. Let me pack a couple of things.”

He gathers another of the pocket tarps and the fleece blanket and stuffs them both into a foldable day pack. He unclips a lantern from the apex of the roof and then digs in the backpack’s waistbelt pocket for a storm lighter. He packs them, nestling the lantern in the folds of the blanket. He hands Hannibal his rainwear and then grabs his poncho.

“Anything you want?”

Hannibal smiles.

“A trick question.”

Will laughs and then leans forwards and kisses him. It’s messy and wet and something that could easily distract them, Hannibal might even groan a little as they part.

“Will we walk all the way back to the other camp?”

“In this? No. We don’t need to. Twenty minutes? Can you manage?”

“I shall restrain myself.”

Will opens the door again and pulls his boots on. He shuffles backwards and pulls his poncho on and then stands on the other side of the doorway. Hannibal more or less imitates him, with slightly less grace and aplomb than he is used to displaying.

“I’m not sure about the plastic suit.” He mutters. Will can only just hear him over the pouring rain.

“Really? Does the job. Don’t lose track of me. I won’t use the torches for a few minutes.”

They walk quietly along one of the paths leading from the camp clearing where they can see two of the tents have lights aglow inside. There’s laughter from one of them. Will smiles at Hannibal. “See?” He gently pulls Hannibal along and switches on a dim head torch after a few minutes. A small light. Not many lumens.

“There’s a good tree. With low branches. Evergreen. I’ve slept there before. We should even be reasonably dry.”

He clasps Hannibal’s hand tighter and they walk a little faster telling themselves perhaps that it’s the rain pushing them to hurry.

The tree, an old redwood cedar, has shed downy bark and needles to make piles between its roots, Will pulls aside a branch, draws Hannibal inside the soft scented space.

“Here. Let me get the tarp and blanket spread out.”

He drops to his knees and undoes his pack. He lights the small candle lantern and hangs it from a low down sawn off branch clearly used before for the purpose. Then he spreads out first the tarp and then the blanket.

“We can wrap it round us if we’re cold. Like a burrito.”

He looks up and sees that Hannibal has already removed his rainwear and is working on the buttons of his shirt. Will’s mouth dries. Oh. Fuck. This is going to happen. Never mind he came only an hour or so ago. Hannibal is going to strip him, fuck him, and knot him. He can hardly bear the anticipation of it, wants him already inside, rocking together so he can keen and cry his relief and pleasure. Hurry he wants to say, please, just hurry, I need you.

Maybe Hannibal catches something of his urgency. He did say, before, and he stills his hands working at the rough string on his pants. He drops down beside Will and pulls the day-sack from his hands.

“Let me undress you. Close your eyes. Let my lips give you sight.”

Will closes his eyes. And Hannibal begins the soft process of taking every item of clothing from him. Gentle hands, stroking and caressing him. His lips tracing the paths his hands take. By the time Will is undressed and Hannibal pushes him back to the blanket he is hard and wet and panting again. Hannibal finishes with his own clothes. Folds them to one side. A tangled mess with Will’s. Then he lowers himself and hovers just above Will.

“When we bond. It will be because we are not afraid of what anyone else might think. And because we can do no other. Yes? But I shall knot you now. To bind us.”

Will pulls him near and Hannibal settles on him, pushing his legs apart with a knee until they are closer.

“Lift a little. Like that. Good. Later I will take you from behind. But this first time. I want to see your face. Are you wet again?”

Will knows his voice betrays his urgency, he can hear the tremble and husk in it.

“Please. Fuck. Just. You have to.”

“I shall.”

He kneels back up and Will thinks it’s possible he goddam whines. But then he sees that Hannibal is undoing the collar from around his neck.

“Because you should be assured that I am only for you.”

And then he leans back down and shifts Will’s hips and puts one hand on the back of Will’s thigh and pushes. And goddam fucks in, in a long slow steady push that has Will gasping, clutching at the blanket beside him with both hands and then desperately clinging to Hannibal, his arms around his neck, as Hannibal pulls out and then thrusts in again, harder this time. And again. And then again and then so many times Will loses count. Loses the ability to count. He knows he gasps, moans, makes desperate noises which only gain in intensity. Hannibal though groans, praises him, swears. And the force behind each thrust makes Will’s head swim. He’s going to come again. He knows he is. He can feel it. And god. Hannibal is fucking him so hard and with such intensity he is lost to it. He’s going to come he has to.

Then for a bright piercing moment there is a sharp pain and Hannibal catches on the rim of Will’s hole and knots him and Will almost screams as he comes in sync with his Alpha still moving above him. Small thrusts, catching Will every time, forcing him to moan even further, forcing him to produce more slick. Making him wetter. Hannibal says something and hefts him under the arse, pulls him in tighter, so that his back arches off the ground and then

he comes in him again. His knot pulsing behind the orgasm. Enhancing it. Both of them shaking with it.

It hurts. Just a little. But Hannibal hasn't finished and he holds Will down by the shoulders and thrusts hard again, then pushes against the back of both his thighs. Shifting Will's legs higher. So he can push the knot in deeper. Swears and orgasms again.

Breathing hard, sweat gleaming on his chest, catching in the hair there. He carefully lets Will's legs down.

"Rest around me. It will deflate. I'll keep you warm."

Hannibal lies down on him again, stultifying in the heat he is throwing out. And then draws the blanket and ground sheet around them both.

"All right? My lovely Will. All right. I didn't hurt you?"

Will knows he's being clingy yet again. But he holds Hannibal tightly.

"No. You didn't. It feels. Tight. Full. I can't bear the thought of being empty again."

Hannibal kisses his throat and his neck. Sucks over the bruise he left earlier.

"The soulbond. We'll have that too. Everything. We shall have everything." He stops and kisses at the wetness on Will's face. "I know. I know. Better for you to wait."

Will buries his face in Hannibal's neck. And they rest together until Hannibal softens enough to draw out of him. They lie there, slowly kissing. Sweet things, sipping. Tasting. Until Hannibal draws one of Will's hands down to his cock.

"See how hard I am. I want to take you again. From behind. Hold your neck, use that beautiful arch of your back. Have you lean back on me. So I can push up into you. Bring you to orgasm on my knot alone. Yes?"

Will nods and they both sit up. He shivers, turns and drops to all fours. Then spreads his legs. He looks back over his shoulder and watches as Hannibal carefully lines himself up and then pushes in. Not in a single slide this time, but in increments, as though he is having to hold himself back.

When they are seated together, Hannibal slowly, so slowly it makes Will want to scream, sits back up until he is kneeling, as he does so he pulls Will with him, his chest tightly pressed against Will's back. Hannibal bites very lightly at the junction of Will's neck and shoulder. He rocks them together. Grinds against Will's arse.

"This was the way an Alpha would take an Omega he intended to bond. He would fuck them, knot them, and bond them. To bring it to fruition the Omega would turn and return the bite. It gave them a modicum of control. If they were reluctant or unsure."

"I won't hesitate. When you bond us. I won't."

Hannibal thrusts again. Harder this time.

“My Omega. Shall I knot you again. Will you come for me?”

“Everything. I’ll do everything. Fuck.”

Hannibal sucks harder on Will’s neck and then they are both lost to it as he desperately fucks into him. When Will comes Hannibal has to hold himself away so that he doesn’t twist Will round, contraposto, and bite down on the bonding gland. He knots and comes and the noise he makes is something close to a desperate howl.

When they have exhausted themselves again. They both cling to one another and wrap themselves in the blanket.

“I’m sorry. I was almost overtaken by the need to have you.”

Will laughs a little desperately.

“I told you. Everything.”

Hannibal holds him tighter.

“We shall. We have time. We shall. I promise.”

They maybe sleep for a few minutes, maybe longer, and then Will stirs, and sighs.

“We’d better go back. I don’t want to. I still can hardly bear not to be touching you.”

They help each other dress. Both elated and still knowing they are missing the thing that will make them irrevocably connected. Where the separateness they currently feel, those walls between them will be dismantled. Hannibal finishes dressing first and takes the tarpaulin from Will and folds it over his arm. It has stopped raining.

As they push through the lower branches of the tree to step beyond its circling presence Will puts his hand out to Hannibal’s arm.

“I heard something.” He closes his eyes. “Beyond the path. Something.”

“Or someone?”

Will nods.

“It’s possible.”

Hannibal considers him. His face upturned, listening, sensing. He looks like a gift. Something radiant and precious. Not to be wasted or delayed.

“We should go back. And if someone did see, well, I want to be clear, I have no regrets Will.”

He pulls Will in closer to him and kisses him again. A little harder. Will pushes back. And then more urgently still. And then takes the tarpaulin and drops it where they stand and

pushes them both back to the ground.

“Are you sure?” Hannibal manages.

“Everything.”

This time, when Hannibal is buried deep inside him and his knot is catching he takes a deep breath and bites down on the bonding gland at Will’s throat. He comes. With his knot pulsing. And Will with his head tipped back moaning as he comes too, over their joined hands.

“Alpha.”

It is almost dawn when they eventually make their way back. More than just their fingertips linked. Both feeling infinitely happier. Illuminated.

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Abel sits up in the tent and switches on their electric lantern as Fred pushes back in through the door, raindrops splashing off him.

“Damnit, Fred. You’re soaking. Is it still raining? Mind your jacket. Fred!”

Fred tries to get his over-trousers off and his jacket and not get water everywhere. Abel watches him in something like despair. There will be puddles later.

“Sorry. Sorry. I just went to take a leak. You know. Damn. The markers are hard to see in the dark. Got lost. Nearly. Felt like I walked for ages.”

“Yeah? What time is it? God, Fred it’s nearly five.”

Abel slumps back down into his bag. He runs his hands through his hair to shake off some of the wet that Fred has liberally distributed. He screws his ear plugs back in, pulls the hood from his sleep shirt over his head and goes determinedly back to sleep. Five am? Fuck.

Fred gets his jacket and trousers off eventually and sits on his mat, dumps them off to one side. He debates whether he can be bothered to change again. Decides against it. Everything feels damp anyway even though that might be because he’s a little chilly. He sighs. Thinks about what he saw and whether he should say anything. Or do anything. Shit, he thinks to himself. Then he considers what Randall said earlier, this could get very messy. Very, very messy.

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Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will quietly moves the tarpaulin off the woodpile and hangs it over a tree to dry, clipping it to prevent it from blowing away. Hannibal, he hopes, is asleep now. He can get at least an hour in before he needs to be up to take his turn with the fire. The rest of the camp-site is quiet. To be sure it is still painfully early but he's pleased that first light and the resulting birdsong doesn't seem to have disturbed anyone. And the rain has finally cleared, leaving the sky a washed out pale blue that will deepen later with the sun.

There's enough wood for breakfast and he'll probably light the fire soon if only because he'd kill for a hot drink right now. Somehow that train of thought reminds him to search through his pant's pockets for his suppressants. He has a moment of panic when he pats each pocket and finds them empty and then remembers he saw them in the packable bowl by the door where he and Hannibal have taken to dumping out things they both use or which they don't want to get lost in the scrum of the tent.

He better remember to take them later. And he better talk to Matthew, maybe take him aside to explain. Though that's a fun talk he's not really expecting to enjoy. Hannibal had said their eyes won't come in as a double ring for at least twelve hours, and it can take longer. So, he might have the whole day to think up something appropriate to say. Yeah. Appropriate. To the guy who wanted to fuck your brains out just a few days ago. Oh yeah. Sorry I was struggling with an unwanted Attachment, but you know we knotted that out and yeah we're good. Oh and did I say bonded? Soulbond. Right. Because I'm an Omega. Shall we shake and be friends? And you know you said you might hate me? How's that going? Still want to fuck me? Thought not.

He walks round the fireplace to where the tins with coffee and tea are kept and grabs a tea bag, and then fills the largest shared kettle they have with water. He sets the fire, lights it, possibly prays it will catch given that it's still quite damp and watches the smoke curl thickly before a glimpse of bright yellow and orange gives him hope. He sets the kettle above the fire. Then pulls his own small kettle from the pile of dried washing up and fills it a little over half full. He shunts the two kettles around and then sits back to wait for his to get within shouting distance of boiling so he can make a drink.

Someone left their folding chair out the previous night so he settles down into the slightly damp woven nylon to wait it out. He can hear Wen off just beyond the perimeter of the clearing. Huffing. She'd been sitting up, looking alert when they'd come back to the tent, and her tail wagging ecstasy at seeing them had been almost more than Will could take. Somehow your animal companion adapting and adopting your mate is a big deal, yet another one he hadn't anticipated. Just one in the long list of unanticipated life changing events of the last week.

The small kettle begins to wheeze, a curious anxious sound which he truncates as quickly as possible. People adapt to noise fast, it's anything new that stands out. That alerts and alarms

them. But all the tents are quiet, there's no surreptitious rustling or muted conversation. He'd give it about another twenty minutes, give or take a little. Probably most of them have their internal clocks set for around seven. Though he hasn't really asked Jack about their normal rota patterns. Eight hours on, sixteen off? He should ask.

The projected walk today is easy enough. One sharp ridge to navigate right after their lunch spot. Slippery too. But the rest is straightforward, a slow descent, then level, then a short but steep incline. Tonight they'll pitch up at a site where he's left one of the food caches. That's always a nice surprise. He grins. There's a jar of 'shine they might appreciate, comes with a ghost story too.

It's a good site and they'll spend two nights there. Give everyone a chance to relax. Discuss their tent arrangements. Talk about any tips or tricks the pairs have discovered to make their lives easier. And with any luck at dusk they'll be able to hear the loons. Should make a for a great evening. Tomorrow, they'll make shelters in the morning. Eat lunch. Do some further work on them, sleep in them overnight. He smiles. Give everyone a break from their tent mate. Hmm. Yeah. Ok. It's his job he reminds himself. Focus.

Wen comes back to his side and snuffles in his hand. Her nose is as wet as he'd predicted. He whispers to her as he rubs her forehead with his own.

"That's lovely of you. Use me as a handkerchief why don't you. Why don't you go and wake up someone else with that nice wet nose. Let's see if Jack still likes you after he's had a kisser full of that. What do you think?"

She sneezes at him. And rubs at her face with a paw.

"If you're trying to be cute I'm not buying any of it. Nope. Not a thing. And don't drink my tea. Fool dog. I'll get your breakfast soon. Or do you want to wake up a cross Alpha. Yeah. Didn't think so. Drink the water in your bowl."

He pours some of the water from his own kettle into his cooling tea, three quarters empty but hey he forgot to take the bag out so it'll be fine. Rests his hand an inch away from the side of the big kettle. Yup. Getting there.

Just after seven he hears movement from one of the tents. And the winner is.. Frederick. Which is a good thing as he's on breakfast. And sure no wood people yet but the fire's going and they can make it through until wash up so that's ok. And oh, yeah, he remembers the rota, he's also cooking, so he and Fred should get on with it. He looks Fred over. Looking tired he thinks. Maybe a little worried.

"Hey. Morning. You want coffee or tea? I've got hot water. There's a log here with your name on."

Fred stumbles a little and then lowers himself onto the the mossy bit of trunk, split down the middle, rolled onto the round side so the flat does as a seat or level surface, sighing as he does so. He does an almighty yawn. Blinks a little blearily.

"Tired. Couldn't get back to sleep."

Will holds up a mug and Fred nods back.

“Either. Don’t care. Two sugars. I’m going to need it. You got pain killers? No don’t worry, I’ve probably got some.”

He fishes around in a pocket and pulls out a bottle with a child-proof lock on it. He holds it out to Will.

“I can never do these things. Help me?”

Will takes the bottle and presses and twists, hands it back, and then passes Fred the lid as well.

Fred yawns again and then throws two of the small tablets back into his mouth. Attempts a dry swallow which makes him retch a little and make gagging noises.

“Hateful. Ugh. Thanks.”

Will hands him a black coffee liberally sugared and Frederick takes a generous mouthful.

“Hot. Good. I’ll be past monosyllables soon. God I hate mornings.”

“Something wake you? I’m sorry. I was walking round pretty early.”

“God no. Not your fault. I needed a leak. Couldn’t get back to sleep again. Got a little bit lost on my way back. Panicked me. Then I remembered the markers. Stupid of me to forget.”

Slowly Will shakes his head.

“Hey. It’s easy to do. But if you’re lost, you can shout. Doesn’t matter if it’s night time. Better to wake everyone up and not be lost. Ok? Take a whistle with you, and if you’re in trouble, use it. That’s ok. Not everyone is up to a good shout. But a whistle? Wen would hear it, even if I didn’t. And I usually do.”

Fred sighs, drinks his coffee, shuffles on the upturned log a little.

“Will. I’m sorry. I have to ask you something. Well. More like tell you something. Last night..”

He pauses and Will’s heart sinks. So there had been someone. Damn.

“Fred? Can you keep it to yourself for the day. I need to talk to a couple of people about what’s happened. I’m sorry if it puts you in an awkward position.”
Slowly Fred nods his head in agreement. This is Will’s gig after all. He’s the one who should make the call on handling this.

“Of course. You can trust me.” He mimes zipping his mouth shut. “Oh I know. But I’m surprisingly good at keeping my mouth shut when I have to. And I shall. About this.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it. Ok. So. Breakfast? It’s our old friend porridge. Can you build the fire up and get another pot of water on. I expect everyone will start getting up soon. And then it’ll be no peace for us. Ok?” Fred reaches forwards to reach one of the upturned empty pots. He gets to his feet.

“No problem. You can rely on me Will.” He yawns again. “Especially if you make more coffee.”

Will watches him dither around for a few minutes, but eventually Fred gets the pot filled with water, finds a lid that fits the pot and gets it levelled on the fire. Yawning all the while. He makes him another coffee and Fed nods absently when he drinks it. Yeah, this is going to go so well.

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It turns out they’ve got the morning routine down pat. At least as far as personal gear goes. It’s only the third day and the second morning and two hours from wake up to departure? Well. Good enough. Once the whole group is ready Will takes the bag of tent pegs Hannibal hands him and smiles slightly.

“Got everything?”

“I believe so.”

It’s a fleeting moment but Will suspects he might be radiating ‘happy idiot’ vibes. He ticks off a mental list of who he really should talk to today. Well. Matthew and Jack. Hannibal he sincerely hopes will deal with Randall. Fred and Abel already know. And that just leaves Tobias. So he might as well talk to him too. Though if Franklyn is as perspicacious as he thinks he might already have an inkling. Oh well. His dad is almost certainly enjoying this immensely. He looks around, time to get on.

“So. Easy route this morning. I marked the maps. You should be ok. In a minute I’ll ask for a volunteer. We’re heading for a two night site. I’ll talk you through it when we get there. For today. Navigation. We’ll be building shelters at the site tonight so if you see any long thin whippy branches growing from the base of hazel or chestnuts just say. Yeah. I know. I’ll show you which ones they are first time we pass them. Usually they sprout from the bottom if they’ve been coppiced, but all kinds of people have been up here looking for stakes and pales. So we could be lucky. And, to be honest, I might have helped a few along, over the years. Ok. Onwards?”

Abel offers to navigate with Randall backing him up. “We looked the route over last night. Randall might need to hold my hand but I think I’ve got it. You willing to let me try?”

Will looks at the rest of the group. Jack smiles.

“I trust you with a scalpel. Sure Abel, have at it. I trust Randall too. And anyway. We gotta be ready to be just a little uncomfortable out here.”

Tobias laughs unexpectedly. Everyone turns to him.

“That wasn’t Jack’s line last night. He forgot the valve on his mat. Woke up bitchin about his shoulder being crushed. What times was it? Three? Something like that?”

Jack shrugs.

“Yeah. Well. Different kinds of uncomfortable aren’t there. Physical’s not the same as psychological. Or emotional. We all know that. Anyway, how do these damn fool mats work? Says it self inflates? How’s that?”

He and Will talk the joys of modern backpacking mattresses and just how good self-inflating really is. Tobias leans in to join in and the rest gather their belongings, ready to go. Abel sets them off with Randall as close to his elbow as a shadow. A good second it crosses Tobias’ mind. Randall is a good second. Not a leader, though he’d maybe like to be. But a solid assist. And damn. He wonders if Jack knows it. Or indeed if Randall does.

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Maybe an hour into the morning’s walk Hannibal sees Matthew drop back a little and fall into step beside Will. He reminds himself not to be annoyed, though he discovers it is hard to focus on whatever it is that Fred it talking to him about. Something about the cat hole markers. Wen pads past him and then does a slow lope up to Will and pushes between the two of them. He smiles. And might be forgiven if it is just a little smug.

Matthew reaches down and ruffles her neck.

“She’s such a good girl. You’ve got her well trained. Old school. I like it.”

Will can’t think of a sensible reply, but he manages to dredge up something he hopes is good enough.

“My dad really. He loved her.”

“Yeah? Guy in the photo wasn’t it? I’m sorry about that. I’m guessing he’s not around now.”

Will is about to shake his head and say something, anything, when Matthew carries on.

“He looks like an Alpha. But I’m betting Omega. Right?” His voice gets lower, quieter. “Like you?”

Will doesn’t stop walking. But it takes him a moment to think of a way to reply. Something that doesn’t compound whatever disaster this could be.

“Thought so. I found these in your tent last night. I wasn’t snooping Will, I wouldn’t do that. It was when I got the tarp, yeah? For the wood pile. Look. I don’t mind. You could have said. I get why you wouldn’t. But. I’m not like that.”

Matthew passes him the small bottle of plus-suppressants. Will pockets it. They carry on walking. A small gap between them and the pair in front. A larger gap between them and the pair behind.

“Matthew. I’m sorry. I couldn’t say. I don’t tell people. It’s just. It’s not something I do.”

“But Hannibal knows? He must do. The bottle was just lying there, with your stuff.”

“He knows. So does Abel. Maybe Jack. And Fred. Though not because I told all of them. They just, well, found out. Hannibal I did tell. I had to.”

Matthew looks at him, then looks away off to the side of the path, into the trees beyond, he carries on walking and Will wonders if the line of his jaw has tightened and just how angry he is right now.

“Isn’t me is it? The ring? I didn’t see how it could be. Because... but. I know these things aren’t exactly reliable as indicators. And your eyes. Well. Would you have told me? If I hadn’t found them?”

“I would. And if you’ll believe me. I would have told you today. I’d planned to.”

Matthew makes a small disbelieving noise.

“Yeah? And I’d believe that because? Oh.” He goes quiet for a minute. Then he sighs. “Wait. Oh. Just. For fuck’s sake. Fuck.”

He stops and turns to look at Will.

“Oh that’s just fucking brilliant. You utter... fuck.”

The pair behind have almost caught up and Matthew glances behind at Abel and Jack.

“Well just fuck it. So what the hell was Thursday all about?”

Will shakes his head a little, and explains. Not everything. But maybe enough. Matthew darts angry looks at him now and again and from a long way back Hannibal has to resist catching them both up to intervene. The line of Matthew’s shoulders has gone hard and even from fifty feet back Hannibal can see he is annoyed. Eventually though he seems to capitulate. Or at least subside.

“God. I said I might still want to fuck you even if you pissed me off.”

“I really am sorry. And if it hadn’t been this way. Well. I did mean it.”

“Yeah. On Thursday you did. Well. Fuck.” He sighs again. “A soulbond? I don’t think I’ve even met anyone with one. Maybe Jack? Hard to tell with him.”

“Hannibal’s parents were the same.”

“Is it genetic?”

“I’ve no idea. I’d barely even heard of it. Like a sledgehammer though.”

“Yeah? That bad? Or good? Depending on how you look at it, I guess. So. You going to seal the deal.”

He gestures to Will’s throat, currently covered by a neck baffle, the day being cold enough to just about warrant it. He sees the look on Will’s face.

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Oh, is about right. It’s why I was going to tell you. No one else knows about it. Not yet.”

“But your secondary ring will come in? And so will his? Ahhh, Fuck. God this is going to hit him hard.”

“Yes. I know.”

Matthew looks at him.

“Do you? About Randall. He’s convinced it’s him. God Will. I’m pissed, but you know, I just wanted a good fuck. Hang out. He wants the whole thing, the title, the castle, the family. He’s not going to be happy. You better be leaving it to Hannibal to tell him. He ought to have at least one of the shitty conversations to get this straightened out.”

“He plans to. Matthew? Can we get past this? I know you’re probably angry, rightly so. But can we try. Not just because of the trip or the group. I did mean it. Before. I think we get on. I like you.”

Matthew laughs. “Yeah. All right. Friend-zone me why don’t you. We’ll work it out. I’ll just fuck with Hannibal a little. It’d be good for my ego to wind him up. Damn Will. You fucker.”

“I did warn you.” He holds up a hand in protest. “I know. I know. Too soon.”

Matthew punches him lightly in the arm.

“Fucking Omegas. Always thinking with their holes.”

“Bastard.”

“Yeah. I will be.” He ruffles Wen’s head. “God, even the dog got between us.” He gives Will a lopsided grin and then speeds up to catch the pair ahead of them. Will let’s the pair behind catch up with him. Abel shoves him in the arm.

“All right?”

“Oh yeah. Peachy. Like cobbler.”

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The pancakes Fred makes for lunch turn out well. There’s a mostly quiet ring of people sitting round eating, making small noises of contentment. The water bottles have been filled

again. They've replenished the wood pile. There's water on the fire for washing up and hot drinks. Fred, Abel, Tobias and Jack are clearly under slept. So is Hannibal. All of them yawning. Both Matthew and Randall seem to be all right. Matthew a little quiet. Will reminds himself that actually it's all going well. No one has burnt themselves or any food. And no one has yet had a big falling out with anyone else in the group.

Day four he thinks. It usually happens around day four or five. Or about a third of the way through a trip. Leaving just enough time for everything to be resolved or for it to blow over. He's only had one group fall apart. A bachelor party where it turned out one of the groom's friends had been seeing the prospective groom without anyone knowing. Might have been kept between the group if the fiancé's brother hadn't been in the party. It had all come to blows. He's had a furious call from the fiancé as though somehow it was down to him that the groom and his sex-buddy had been found out. Yup. Should have gone to Vegas. Hopefully Jack won't feel the same way. Though he can't see the group fitting in there especially, in some casino, catching a show, getting wasted together. Different kind of team building and bonding. He catches himself. Smiles. Aches a little.

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The afternoon walk goes much as he'd hoped. The sharp steep ridge is as slippery as he'd feared and in the end after Tobias loses his footing, comes down almost on one knee, he hammers two 'friends' into a seam in the rock face and threads a line through to help everyone keep upright. As he holds one end of the thin dyneema rope he looks Tobias over.

"Ok?"

"Yes. Stupid. You did say, and I still didn't concentrate. Shocking. So easy isn't it. Just a second of distraction."

"Anything in particular distract you?"

Tobias frowns at Will. "I don't think so. Not especially. Maybe a light. No. I don't think so."

Will looks off into the woods wondering if something could have caught his eye. People drop stuff out here all the time. Cans. Aluminium foil. Bit of glass. Anything shiny could give off a flash of light, if the sun caught it right. Disquieting though, for Tobias.

"Hurt yourself at all? Anything strained?"

The others pass them on the path where it widens just beyond the ridge so he goes back to untie the other end of the line. He makes his way back carefully and leaves the two 'friends' in the seam. They might come in useful another time. Probably shall. Half way across, where Tobias slipped he looks to see if there's anything glinting. But there's nothing. Just an accident then. A momentary lapse.

Tobias hefts his backpack over his shoulders again. Plants both his walking poles more securely the next few steps. Then he smiles at Will.

"I'm good. Thank you."

The rest of the walk is without incident. And when they arrive at the evening site there is much relieved banter. No one really wants to make the effort over the fire but Will chivvies them along, gets it alight, gets water on. There's a certain amount of tired grumbling. He gives Hannibal the kind of look that means he promptly ceases to complain about wooding. Yeah, Will thinks, perks go both ways.

The revelation of the contents of the food cache with a block of actual cheese, butter, sixteen eggs and a pack of bacon cheers the group up considerably.

Hannibal smiles when Will carries each pack to the fire and unwraps them like he is one of the Magi delivering up gold, frankincense or myrrh.

"I'm assuming this wasn't the good fairies in the wood. When did you bring this up?"

Will laughs.

"Monday. No. Wait. Last Sunday. Stuff like this will last for at least a week. Even the bacon. I packed it in freezer blocks and straw. Yeah. I know. Used an insulated freezer bag to bring it up, makes a nice treat, then I just use a buried hay box. Works as a cooker too. Just heat the pot up to boiling, bury it in the box, pack the straw around it, put the lid back on. And then just leave it alone. I've done stews and a slightly soggy cake that way. Not beans though. People do, but I'm careful with beans."

Fred, who has been showing total dedication about the food keeps mixing the dehydrated potato with hot water. An eye on the cheese block which would make a good addition to the potato cakes on the recipe card Will handed him. If there's a grater.

"Oh. Because of wind?"

Will smiles at him. "Actually partly. Yes. Not conducive to a good night's sleep. All that indigestion. Not good for tent relationships either. So. You want the skins to be broken down really well to offset that particular issue. Hay boxes won't do it. And undercooked kidney beans are just asking for trouble. Great in chilli but undercooked will kill you."

"I thought that was a myth?"

Will shakes his head. "Sadly not. After supper.." He holds up his final surprise, a large mason jar with a screw top lid. "I've got some moonshine from a guy I know. Who knows another guy. Who has a friend... you get the idea. Anyway. He told me a bean story. I'll tell you all. Later."

Randall smiles. "We going to do ghost stories round the camp fire. I haven't done that since I was a kid. I know a few good ones."

"Sure. It's a good night for it. Food. Chores. Stories."

"And 'shine."

"Yeah. And 'shine. And anything else anyone wants to tip into the ring. I bet a few of you have secret stashes."

Matthew smirks at him, and Will thinks maybe it will be ok after all. “Oh yeah. Secret stashes. Plenty of those.”

Or maybe not.

The group works its way through their arrival routine. Fred gets on with food while Abel gets their tent up. Jack keeps the fire going while Tobias does theirs. Randall and Matthew seem to be arguing the merits of getting water before or after they eat, or both. Hannibal disappears off and Will hopes he has either gone for more wood or is sorting out their tent. Or Randall. Now also no longer in sight.

He’s the only one who doesn’t look around startled when there is a terrible haunting wail from somewhere in the trees.

The loons. Sounding like death made manifest. Perfect timing he thinks.

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Chapter End Notes

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Happy Birthday EvertonEm! You’re awesome!

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Bit of nsfw in the middle section...

When the fire is lit and dinner eaten and the stories and ‘shine have started to flow Hannibal returns to the campsite. Tobias hands him a plate they covered and saved, and he nods gratefully to him. Of Randall however, there is no sign. Will glances round the group, no one seems to be paying his absence much attention, but that may be deliberate, Yeah, maybe, he watches as Hannibal locates Matthew and then sits beside him and begins to eat, he sees Matthew listen carefully with a worried look on his face when Hannibal says something quietly into his ear, he murmurs something back and then gets up and heads to his tent. Hannibal carries on with his belated dinner.

Jack looks round at Will who he is sitting next to.

“Know what that’s about?”

Will decides to front up about it, Jack’s been straight with him about everything on the trip so far, only fair really that he returns the favour. He slumps internally though, more than a little. Yeah, this isn’t embarrassing at all.

“Ok. And I’m pretty sure you know this wasn’t planned in the slightest. Hannibal and I. It’s. Well..kinda hard to know where to start.”

Jack holds his hand up a little.

“It’s ok. Abel told me last week. I thought. Well. Doesn’t matter what I thought then. He said soulbond. But that means, well, I’m married to an Omega. You know I know what that means.”

He sees Will nod, looking maybe a little of the embarrassment he feels at explaining but also, at heart, overjoyed and also overwhelmed by it. Jack smiles at him sympathetically.

“Yeah. Full on isn’t it. I’m amazed you’re still on top of things. I’d have been out of my mind. I was, when it happened. Three days of complete damn foolery and no idea really what I did or said. You’re holding together pretty well.”

Will manages to smile a little at him, holding together? Right. That may be a slight exaggeration on Jack’s part.

“Maybe. I’m a bit freaked by it. Pleased. Sure. And also freaked. I am sorry though. I should have said something. Or done something. It’s a bit complicated. I thought Hannibal was

married. I resisted the whole thing the first couple of days after we met."

Jack suddenly laughs, a huff of noise and raises his glass to Will.

"That's why he's been such a grouse. Damn Will, he's been utterly off his game for days. I thought he'd cheered up, I'd hoped it was the whole woods thing, you know, getting out, the great outdoors."

Will has a momentary flash of the previous night, Hannibal holding him by the nape of his neck, kissing him as he ground his knot even tighter inside him, Will moaning, pulling Hannibal in to him harder, both of them desperate.

"Yeah. Well, maybe. Part of it anyway. I think so. We had a really helpful conversation. Sorted it out. But.."

Yeah, and the rest, he thinks. He takes a deep breath, blows his lips out, thinks he really owes it to Jack to tell him the whole thing.

"I think I should tell you, it's not just an Attachment. Both of our eyes will come in, probably overnight. Double ring. I'm on suppressants. We should be ok. And the colour won't come through, they're plus meds. And I'm a non-secretor so even the single isn't especially visible. And I'm talking way way too much."

Jack glances sideways at him again. And then takes a long meditative sip of his drink. He looks round the campfire, at the steady glow illuminating everyone's faces, Matthew and Randall still not with the others.

"Ok. Three things. First, I won't hold it against you. It's not something you can predict or even necessarily control to any great extent.. the timing is shit. But, as I say, unpredictable. Though I said to Abel that I thought you were professional enough we wouldn't find you fucking against some tree, I'd like to keep it that way. Second, if anyone gives you any grief about being Omega I want to know. I won't have that kind of bullshit in my team. No question. All right? Lastly, who knows already? Me, Abel, Hannibal, you? Anyone else?"

"I spoke to Matthew. He'd been friendly and I think might have been interested and I didn't think it was fair not to tell him. So, him too. And Fred. He. Err.." He pauses. Actually he never did ask Fred exactly what he saw, he just assumed it was him and Hannibal. "Maybe Fred." He ventures. "He got lost coming back from taking a piss. It's possible he saw or heard something." He feels a bit of an idiot using a euphemism but hell he's not going to lay it all out there straight off.

Jack takes another mouthful of 'shine, Will would like to think it maybe goes down the wrong way as he coughs on it a little.

"So. That's just Toby then. You going to tell him. You know? Full house? Because I'm going to assume that Hannibal has now told Randall."

Will looks down into his own drink. It's a smaller measure than he's given the others because he's always careful. He may join in but he always has to have an eye on the group, what's

going on, what the woods are doing. What's happening out there around them, in the quiet teeth filled dark.

"Ok. I'd thought about doing that too. Just one person not knowing? Any of us kinda pussy footing around it all? Doesn't seem fair. And to be honest, I think his Franklyn knew something was up."

"Franklyn? Yeah. He's perceptive. Understands about people, knows their weak spots, and their strengths. Amazing with kids. Yeah. He might well know. Ok. So. You'll tell him? Tonight or in the morning?"

"I'll put us on water together. It will give us a chance to talk properly."

Jack nods, drains his mug and holds it out for a top up.

"All right then. Watch out for Randall, he can be a bit of a sore loser. I'll talk to him if I need to."

"Thanks Jack. I mean it. And I am sorry."

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Eventually after another half hour of stories and drink and exchange Randall comes and joins the group, he sits down between Abel and Fred and takes a mug when it is passed to him, he toys with the bowl of dinner he's given. He doesn't say much at first but eventually joins in a quiet conversation with Abel. Will carefully doesn't look at Hannibal. Later on will be soon enough for that particular conversation.

Matthew joins them and sits beside Will and holds his leaf mug out to him.

"Better save me enough for a double, right? Ask Jack if he's got any brandy left."

Will swears quietly under his breath.

"Ahh. Shit. Sorry. Bad?"

Matthew takes the almost empty jar of 'shine from Will and turns it in his hands. He takes a careful sip and then drains it in one go and then coughs. He thumps his chest, as though to ease the slow roast of his oesophagus.

"God that burns. I'll be honest. I'm pissed. But you were upfront, and that counts for something with me. And I think we do get on. I like you. Of course I'd still fuck you, yeah, don't look like that, look like that and Hannibal will be straight over and deck me. And I reckon you pack a nasty hook too. But attraction is one thing. We'll get past me having a fucking crush on you, yeah don't look so smug. Git. And don't deny it. But if we come out of this still able to share a jar and piss about in the woods that's good. I'm friends with several exes. And hey we don't even have to get around any memories of how good the other was in the sack. Ok? Yeah. Good. Hannibal can suck that right up. Remember what I said about him being possessive? Did I say that to you? Maybe it was Randall. Ok yeah. Randall. Give me something else to drink first."

He holds out his leaf again and Will turns to Jack on his other side and murmurs a request. Jack pulls a flask from his pocket and doesn't make any kind of comment. Will puts a measure into the tiny silicon mug and passes it back to Matthew and then the flask back to Jack. Jack pockets it again.

"Randall. Well. Randall is furious. I mean, beyond furious. Incandescent. And he doesn't entirely believe Hannibal either. Thinks he's in denial or something like that. Something very not good? You get me. He still thinks he can make it happen. Put himself in a good light. Help Hannibal see. This could go one of two ways either he'll be an utter shit and make you look bad, or, and this might be worse, he will beyond helpful and friendly and utterly on board. Neither of these are good. But either way, be careful. Ok. He doesn't do well with coming second. Over competitive little shit."

"He knows you're telling me some of this?"

"Yeah. I said I'd tell you we'd talked. I think he's working out his game play. He said I could tell you whatever I liked. Though I think he maybe thinks I feel more wronged than I do. But then.." he pauses and considers. "Yeah. But then I don't have an Attachment with someone who just fucked his Omega soulbond in a fucking wood."

Will flushes a little and shifts uncomfortably on his chair. Matthew smirks at him.

"God, your face. Too soon? Honestly I'm going to be the worst kind of bastard to you for a bit. If I looked at Hannibal I bet he's very carefully not signalling he is pretty pissed right this second. You checking? Yeah? Am I right."

Will mutters.

"Little bit."

And Matthew laughs.

"Good."

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The next hour shifts into a conversation about some recent innovation in the Operating Theatre and Will lets some of that slip over him. He spends a bit of time thinking beyond the circle of the fire, the circle of faces, the circle of the clearing they're in, out into the wood. All the nocturnal creatures out and about, all the diurnal ones hoping their sleep won't be interrupted. Is hope something they experience? Maybe just a sense of terrified anticipation.

Beside him, between him and Jack, Wen lifts her head and rests it on his knee, he strokes her and checks her ears for ticks or burrs. He murmurs sweet nothings to her. Beautiful girl. Good girl. God of the trees. She grumbles back at him, a happy answer and call between them. Then she yawns. So he ruffles her some more and she gets up and stretches. Taking a final look at him she steps out of the circle and then pads round the back of it until she can find and lean on Hannibal. You little monster Will thinks.

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They tell ghost stories. And it's just possible that everyone moves a little closer in to the tightness of the circle.

At the end of one, after a particularly gruesome pay off, Will shivers.

"Ok. Now even I'm terrified. Rota for tomorrow, let's get some of the more mundane things out of the way. Tobias, you and me on water. We're almost out, I'm sorry it'll mean a bit of an early start for us. Say just before seven? Ok? Fred and Matthew on wood. Fred I know you've just done wood. Sorry. Oh. Anyway. Jack and Hannibal on food and wash up, yeah try not to look so delighted about that. Jack I know you've just been on food you can show Hannibal the ropes. And Randall you're on tidying the site. Can you check the cat hole markers too I think there was an issue with a couple last night. Ok folks. Stay up as long as you like but we're on shelters tomorrow straight after breakfast. Matthew you and Fred need to have just a brief conversation with me in the morning about the bits we brought up today. Ok? Breakfast at 8. It's going to rain again in about half an hour. Just in case you care about that!"

He stands up and nods at everyone.

"Wen? Staying or coming?"

She pauses and rubs her face with her paw. Yeah he thinks. Total little shit stirrer.

"Suit yourself. Good enough. Sleep well everyone."

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When Will comes back from the cat holes he can see that the group is still talking around the fire though Wen is waiting outside the tent for him.

He unzips the tent, gets his boots off, sits them inside one of those crappy shower caps you get free in hotels and slips them just inside the door of the tent. He shuffles back inside and then gets the towel to clean and dry Wen's paws. She lets him fuss over her a bit and then crawls across the tent and onto her mat and circles it a couple of times before settling, chin on her paws, the absolute model of innocence and restraint.

He gets ready for bed; carefully folding his clothes into a bundle which go in one of his reverse fleece stuff sacks for a pillow. He changes into his sleep kit, a pair of silk long johns and a silk hoody, warm and they feel great, lightweight too. Perfect he thinks. He always brings two pairs for a trip this length if he's sharing a tent, though he could probably get them washed and dry in a day. He smiles to himself as he thinks of Donald Sutcliffe and his angsting about carrying too much kit. Yeah. He knows that feeling all too well. Just one more, just this, Oh and maybe this too. And so on.

He crawls under his quilt, appreciating the fact that Hannibal straightened out the whole tent before he came out for breakfast, well more like a cup of coffee and some sarcasm than actual breakfast. But good enough, as long as he doesn't do that every day. Will guesses that eventually he'll just get cranky. So will the others if they don't get enough sleep tonight as the shelter night can be a bit of a doozy. And they were mostly already looking tired.

He stretches his back and hears a small click, and, yeah, that's better. He can't decide if he's so tired he's come out the other side of it, did he actually even go to bed last night? Or maybe he's ok, and the relief and ok, yeah, the sex has made him all dozy and happy. Maybe it's a bit of both.

The bond though? Wow. It's like a constant nagging demand for attention. He can feel it just throbbing away, like something lurking and waiting to pounce on him. God he'll have to restrain himself. They will have to negotiate some kind of way to manage this because if it wouldn't be all kinds of humiliating he'd be out at the fire right now demanding Hannibal get his arse over here right this minute. He gives himself a little mental shake. This is really not like him in the slightest. Maybe that's the point. It isn't just him now, it's a them, an us, a we. And that is more than just a little terrifying.

There's a rustle at the door way and Hannibal unzips the tent and does the weird reverse twist you have to do to get in, sit down and keep your feet outside the tent all in one go. Will stops thinking about terrifying. He just thinks about Hannibal.

"Hey. How are you?"

Hannibal takes off his boots and then accepts the second shower cap from Will and tidies them away to the side of the entrance. He swivels to sit on his mat facing Will.

"We have just concluded it was tactful of you to leave us to have a brief conversation. Jack explained the situation to Tobias, and, as it turns out, also to Frederick. Whatever he saw last night, it wasn't us. Will you ask him? Good. I think he's certainly bothered. But didn't want to say what about in the group. Matthew was exceedingly gracious and conciliatory and worked hard to ensure Randall felt included in the group and not over exposed. Jack was reasonably pugnacious. I think, if we can support Randall to get through any residual regret we will manage."

He looks at the expression on Will's face.

"Ahh. You think I'm being unrealistically naive and optimistic. Hmm." He considers. "Perhaps. Was Matthew more candid with you?"

Will nods.

"Sure. Let's call it candid. He's being ok about it, though he's looking forwards to jerking your chain some more." He sees the look on Hannibal's face and leans closer to him and says quietly. "But that doesn't really matter because, not that it was a competition, but you totally won, ok. Utterly. And not that I'm exactly a prize. But you still did. Ok? So don't shit on him for it?"

Hannibal looks as though he is about to say something and then he nods.

"I did. You're quite right. Perhaps it behoves me to be generous too." He looks at Will, now propped on an elbow on his sleeping mat. "Are you ready to sleep?"

Will tips his head to one side.

“Did you have something else in mind?”

“Of course I do. I find I am embarrassingly single minded about my desire to be with you. In every respect, and jealous of the time you spend contentedly with others.”

Will laughs.

“Well thank God it’s not just me! I keep getting these little mental pop ups, basically of you fucking me, it’s incredibly distracting! Someone says something and it triggers a memory and damn, sometimes it’s a memory of something that hasn’t even happened yet? How does that work? Anyway. Terrible. I mean, also fantastic. But terrible. And then I miss what they’ve said and I have to either guess from what they’ve moved on to or just ask them to say it again. I feel such an idiot. An incredibly turned on and horny idiot.”

Hannibal raises both his eye brows and then slowly smiles.

“Come here.”

Will looks at him.

“Hey. We’ve already established neither of us are especially quiet.”

“Will.”

Fuck, he thinks. He’s pretty much already thrown back the quilt and blanket and crawled into Hannibal’s lap. Fuck. Hannibal runs a hand up his arm and then down his back.

“Silk. The colour is lovely. Almost black in the moonlight. I imagine a dark sea green. You did say it suited you.”

Will smiles, pleased that Hannibal remembers despite the circumstances in which he said it. Or the circumstances immediately after. When it all went to shit.

Hannibal pulls him a little closer and then tugs the top over Will’s head. He sets it to one side. Then he leans in and pushes Will back a little, tips his head back with a finger under his chin, so he can suck on the bond mark. Then he puts a hand over Will’s mouth and kisses down his chest, sucking and nibbling on each nipple until it hardens and sensitises. Will shifts and tries not to moan. Even behind Hannibal’s hand he thinks he’d be loud enough for everyone to hear. His nipples have been tingling since they bonded and now it’s a riot of sensation. And wow, it’s like there’s a direct line to his goddam arse because now he’s wet and getting hard all at once. And damn that might have been a squirm or even a writhe.

Hannibal keeps a hand over his mouth and then pushes him onto his back, with his other hand he reaches down into Will’s trousers and feels his cock stiffen. He shifts his head back and runs his eyes over Will.

“Take them off. Lie on your front. Widen your legs for me.”

Will swallows hard. If Hannibal knots him here he won’t be able to keep quiet. Neither of them will. Will they? Fuck.

“Will.”

He pushes them down anyway. Then turns onto his front, casting a look over his shoulder at Hannibal, now undressing at a steady pace. He even takes the time to fold his clothes carefully as Will had done, into a pillow bag. Then he reaches over and strokes from the nape of Will’s neck all the way down his spine stopping at his tail bone. He does it again. His hand going maybe a fraction lower. Will arches his back in an involuntary reflex and manages to stifle the corresponding noise he almost makes. He tips his head back, deepening the arch and Hannibal rests his hand just below the small of his back and pushes slightly. Will shifts. Then Hannibal nudges his legs further apart and moves to settle between them, lying so his head rests on Will’s lower back. He kisses him there and slowly begins to lip and kiss and suck down his spine. Each bone is paid attention, a whole ladder of desire that he climbs down, further, closer. Will remembers the thought he’d had of Hannibal licking into him, sucking from the centre, finding him. It’s as good as he’d imagined. God. It’s good. He bites down on his fist to stop himself from whining aloud. As Hannibal eats him out he realises he’s rocking back against his mouth, urgently pressing against him. God he’s so wet. If this is what it’s like with suppressants it’s going to be impossible without them. He widens his legs further, shifting one knee up to the side, and Hannibal eventually works his mouth back up his spine and then pushes into him in a single steady thrust. And then just rests there, large and firm and rocking only the tiniest amount. Will thinks he might scream.

It’s only a few moments before he feels Hannibal’s knot swell and then he can barely move. Hannibal carefully lies along his back almost suffocatingly heavy and hot and hard inside him. He keeps up the rocking, just grazing the very edge of Will’s prostate. Will knows he is making tiny breathy sounds.

And Hannibal is almost silent, his mouth resting against the back of Will’s neck, breathing against him. He stills, gasps and then comes in him, his knot pulsing hard, Will bites on his own hand. Fuck. He might have left teeth marks. God. He moves against the minute thrusts, fuck, he feels almost panicky with the need to come himself. Then Hannibal comes again and Will pushes back as hard as he can so he’s completely stuffed, he breathes faster, god, he’s going to come, he’s going to, just on Hannibal’s knot, just from this. This. This slow possession.

When he comes it’s on a messy rough quiet breathy moan. And he knows Hannibal is pleased.

When his knot deflates he pulls out. Then he rolls Will over so he can encircle him in his arms. He sighs into Will’s hair and caresses him affectionately.

“Do you have your suppressants to hand? I’d like to check what brand they are.”

Will reaches past him to the bowl of stuff they keep by the entrance to the tent. Yeah. They’re still kept there. No point closing the door after that horse has bolted. He passes them to Hannibal who holds them nearer to the lantern to read the small text on the bottle.

“Hmm.”

“Hannibal?”

“I can feel just a faint stirring.” He leans over Will again and kisses the bonding mark. “You’re having a profound effect on me. Do you have enough for me to take one on alternate days?”

Will nods. This is beginning to make sense to him. They’re both feeling the incredible pull towards one another. But a rut and heat? Out here? Not such a good idea.

“Sure. I always pack extra. I get people out here all the time who missed a dose, or forgot their meds, or something, it’s why they’re the plus not because of the colour thing but because A and O can both take them. Are you all right?”

He passes Hannibal one of the water bottles and he accepts it with a nod of thanks and takes one of the small pills.

“Thank you. I’m sorry. This is all rather outside my experience. I assure you I’d generally be thought of as a rather considerate lover.”

Will smirks, just a little.

“You’re fine. Just so we’re clear, I’m not exactly grading you.”

Hannibal frowns a little and then smiles ruefully.

“Perhaps not, but I feel we have missed all the thrill of the courting period.”

Will smiles and then reaches for his sleep clothes. Fuck it, he’ll wash everything in the morning. Hannibal pulls on his own top and pants.

“When we get back you can court the hell out of me, and I’ll do the whole devoted Omega thing. Ok? And meet your mother and your sister. Who by the way hates me, so we’ve got ground to make up there for sure. And damn, we have to talk about residency and work and actually about children.”

Hannibal is quiet a moment.

“There are excellent surrogates. I am confident we will have no trouble there.”

Will smiles. Oh. Ok. Hannibal doesn’t know this bit. Oh, this is going to be so much fun.

“Hannibal. I’ve got the carrier gene. I’m a non secretor. But I’ve still got the gene. I can carry to term. It’s in the family, my father was an Omega. He carried me.”

For a moment he thinks maybe he broke his mate as he’s rendered Hannibal speechless. Goldfish is not a bad look on him.

“Yeah.” He says. “I think we’ve got a fair amount still to talk about. Not right now though. I’d like to go to sleep on that frankly amazing orgasm. Gotta get up in seven and half hours.”

He leans over and kisses Hannibal and then wiggles into his sleeping quilt.

“Don’t forget to turn off the lantern.”

He’s asleep within minutes. It takes Hannibal somewhat longer.

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In the morning when his alarm goes off Hannibal has brought him tea. For a moment he’s horrified he overslept his alarm but it turns out it’s only just after 6:30. Another few minutes of grace. Beside him Wen is eyeing him with a twitchy eyebrow. All through the previous night she’d been quiet, Will had wondered if she’d been bothered by the sex or the noise he made or chemicals he gave off, but no, she seemed to have utterly got on board with this new Alpha in their lives, smelling of god knows what Will wonders. Maybe a little of a certain kind of domination. For all that Hannibal is giving off progressive traits Will knows some of this is simply instinct, they both might address it and challenge it, but the trick will be finding the balance between them. Protective and possessive? Well that goes both ways. And if Matthew is right about Randall? Well.

He remembers a wolverine he saw when he was a kid, up in the Yukon Territory with his dad. It had been caught by a trapper, but the trap didn’t kill it outright, just snared its left hind leg. The trap was on a long chain and there was a circle of blood on the scrabbled ground where the animal had tried to pull free. In the end the damn thing had near gnawed its own leg off in its desperation to escape. Yeah. Cornered desperate half mad with fear or anger, an animal will do almost anything to survive. And yes humans wear the veneer of civilisation, but how long does that last out in the woods when you’re screaming.

He shudders. Everyone has said Randall will find his own way to deal with it. He hopes so. He empties his nearest water bottle into one of portable sinks and puts his night clothes and silk bag liner in to soak. Then he uses a flannel and dips it in the same cold water and washes himself. He’ll have a proper wash with hot water once everyone has started on the shelters. He checks his watch. Yeah time to get on with it.

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Matthew and Fred pull the long whippy lengths of chestnut and hazel into the small clearing. Will has worked this area with his dad ever since they first bought the land. They’d found an old coppiced stand and slowly, patiently coaxed it back to life. Probably the chestnut was used for palings and fence posts, the hazel for fencing and hurdles, maybe some wattle and daub if the families up on the hard tack mountain needed to divide rooms or barns. Now though? It is used almost exclusively to provide materials for shelter building. Every so often he dismantles one or two of the oldest ones that have been built up here and scatters the leaf litter and lets the poles dry for kindling.

The group gathers, all breakfasted and ostensibly all right. He finishes pulling a long straight bit of pine from the side of the path and then drops it in front of him.

“Ok. Shelters. We’ll build enough for one each for tonight. You’re going to need a pole like this. A couple of feet taller than you. You’ll have to denude it of side branches on one side, and I’ve got three hand saws so you’ll need to collaborate. You’re all going to need two other lengths about four foot or so. Basically it’s an unequal tripod that you’re making to begin

with. Got it? See if you can find dropped wood. But there's a small stand of pine if you get desperate. Come and ask if you're at a loss. And keep someone in sight at all times. If you realise you can't see anyone use your whistle, or shout. Wen will hear you if I don't. Ok. Stay still and holler. There have been plenty of shelters built up here over the years so you'll probably find what you need without cutting anything new. This bit should take about forty five minutes. Help each other out."

He walks off to the side to collect two other lengths, shorter than his first by two thirds and then glances up as everyone realises he's not going to coddle them and they begin to make a start. By the time he's stripped the longer pole on one side and clipped the branches on the other side the others have all at least found the long length they'll need. He carries on and sets the tripod with a length of cedar bark to tie it at the top. He uses a traditional tripod knot, the fresh bark thin and flexible enough to manage the twist round the poles. He checks the height and then steps off into the underbrush to find the other wood he'll need. This bit takes him twenty minutes. By the time he's done everyone else has managed to find and mostly strip their poles.

"Great. You're doing great. Ok. So you can see from this one why you have to strip one side. If you don't? Well, this is basically the apex of your roof and no one wants to wake up to twigs poking in their face or backside. There's some red cedar but I've brought everyone enough to make a tie at the top. Don't worry about fancy knots, just get it secure. Again, help each other out. Then the next bit is the bit that takes time. You're going to collect enough lengths to make a frame. These lengths are basically ribs, right? They need to be different lengths, longer for the opening end and shorter for the foot end. Like a sloping tent. You want these to be close together as they're going to support the insulation. Before you start this bit we'll check the height of each shelter. Tobias, can I borrow you?"

Tobias steps over and then twitches a smile at his colleagues and takes a small bow. He and Will discussed this bit earlier on their water walk. This and all the rest of it. He lies down under the tripod almost immediately.

"So, we can see it's about the right height, he can move and turn on his side." Tobias demonstrates. "But not too much gap around him for cold air to circulate."

With the habit of long practice he rests a few of the other lengths along the side of the pole spreading out on either side.

"See? Like walls of a tent. Thanks Toby."

Tobias crawls out and dusts himself off a little.

"So, this could take an hour easily. If you make a start on the tripods, check them before you start the next bit. If in doubt ask each other. Too much space and you'll be cold. Too little and you won't get in the damn thing at all, and you'll be cold. In both these scenarios you'll be cold. The trick is not to be. Questions? Matthew?"

"How deep will the insulation be?"

“Ideally at least three feet deep all round. We’ll make doors too, that’s what the flexible bits are for, we’ll do that part at the end. Great question. The tighter the rib frame the less litter that will fall through as well. So although it takes a crap ton of time it also makes it all easier later. And warmer. At three am tomorrow morning you’ll be glad. Chances are it’ll rain so you’ll be doubly glad. No sneaking back to your tent either.”

He turns back to his own shelter and the rest of the group return to the tripod setting. And then to collecting wood for the sides. They’d started off quiet but now there’s a lot of joking and banter. Fred crowing about being shorter, Randall making a comment about being slight. Both of them will need less material to build their shelters. Will takes forty minutes or so to get the sides of his shelter up. Then he pulls his poncho from his day bag and walks out of the clearing and starts to pile leaf litter into it, when he’s covered about half of it he folds it like a giant hobo bundle and pulls it back to the clearing careful not to snag the nylon. He opens it up again by his shelter. He smiles. The whole group has arranged their shelters in a crude circle with the openings facing inwards. From the air it would look a little like a giant teepee fire set up, just waiting for a match. Almost every group does it like this. Something about the nature of essentially social although not always sociable creatures. The herd instinct, and the communal.

He hunkers down beside Wen and empties half the water bottle she is carrying in her own pack into her bowl, she laps at it happily and he eats an energy bar from his bag and then walks around the group and offers one to each person. When he comes to Randall he doesn’t hesitate and Randall manages a small thank you in response.

“Ok. If you stop for a moment and have a quick look.” He indicates his shelter. “What you’re aiming for is this. A wooden tent. And next you’ll need leaf litter. There’s a lot around here. Pine needles also work but you might want to use broadleaf first to create a barrier so the needles don’t just drop through every gap that’s inevitably left. I learnt that the hard way. But pine needles afterwards? Great. There’s masses underneath the Western Hemlock and Scott’s Pine where they drop. I’m going to go back to the main clearing to put some water on for a drink. It’s almost 11:45. We’ll have a drink at about 12:00. Jack and Hannibal you’re on lunch? I’ll talk you through it at the drink break. I hope you can all say quinoa. If you need me, holler, or it’s a straight run through the trees along this path. You saw the markers?”

Abel laughs.

“Damn. I’m still not looking. What are they? Blazes?”

“Yellow circles, both sides of the trees, to the right of the path in this direction, to the right of the path the other way too. I always paint them on the right side of the path, like you would signs on a road. Four feet above the ground, low enough they’re not too visually obtrusive but high enough they don’t get too easily obscured by the undergrowth. And circles because there’s a mess of blazes out here. The wardens and I agreed, I use circles. People cross this land all the time but this tract is still my property. My dad bought up all kinds of tiny parcels round here and eventually most of them joined up. The map is a total jigsaw. I’ll show you later if you’re interested.”

He piles the leaf litter from his poncho onto the foot end of his shelter. It makes hardly a dent in the total coverage. He turns back to the group.

“And this is the bit that will take for ever. But is really worth doing. Most of it we’ll do after lunch. If you’ve got a poncho or a flat tarp or even any large bit of cloth bring it back with you after we’ve eaten, it makes it easier to carry. I’ll give you a shout when the drinks are ready.”

He walks away along the path and Wen follows him for the first minute and then turns back to go back to the group, where she settles outside of Will’s shelter. The doctors get on with it.

Abel turns to Jack.

“We’re really going to sleep in these tonight? God Jack. How much brandy did you bring? I’ve got a quart of whisky. Anyone else?”

Fred smiles.

“Also whisky. Hannibal, tell me you brought brandy too? Matthew?”

“Port. What? I like port. Rands, gin?”

Randall nods. Tobias laughs at them.

“God. We’re so bad. Do you think all groups do this?”

Fred smiles at him.

“Don’t you remember Will says kids always bring chocolate and sneak bars too each other all night. Attracts the mice. But mice never hurt anyone. Well unless they’re carrying something awful. Or they like your long hair. For their nests. Apparently they nibble it off. He said one of his friends. Oh, Alana, yes? We met her. Dark hair. Nice. The supplier? Anyway she woke up one morning up on a local peak to find a whole chunk missing on one side. Not her best morning ever. Had her hair cut apparently to deal with the mess. Took the hair cuttings up the next time she was there, like a bit of sympathetic magic. Funny. I’ve got some chocolate too. We could have a midnight feast.”

Jack laughs.

“Have you been reading those Boy’s Own annuals again Fred? Yeah. Why not. Unless it’s raining. In which case you’re all on your own. And I’m keeping the flask. Damn I should have asked Will about what to bring instead of glass. Fucking bottles are heavy. Maybe I should decant them into a spare water bottle?”

No one answers him as they get on with their shelter. Huffing a little over the unusual physical effort constant bending and shifting takes. Twenty minutes later they hear a shout in the distance. They all straighten up then, grateful for the possibility of a break.

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Over the break Fred decides he really should talk to Will about what he saw that night. Now that everything is out in the open it must be ok to do so mustn’t it he concludes. On the walk back to the clearing where the shelters are he works out when might be the best moment to have a conversation, where they won’t be overheard and where he will have the time to

explain without being interrupted so he can pinpoint just exactly why he was bothered. Because he's still not 100% sure what he saw, or at least, what it meant, and maybe Will can help him figure it out.

Maybe during lunch? Maybe just after? When people are occupied doing chores and are sorting themselves out to finish off their shelters with insulation.

.....

On the walk to the shelter clearing nobody sees why Fred trips. All they hear is his howl of dismay and then he's there, on the ground shrieking.

Abel drops down by his side straight away.

"Jeez. Fred. What you do? Fall over your own two feet? Let's get this off, gently and slowly, see how you're doing." He starts to undo and then ease off Fred's boot.

Jack and Hannibal both kneel down beside them whilst Tobias goes back to the main site for Will and the first aid kit. Randall and Matthew kind of hover. Concern writ large on all their faces. Frederick is white faced and sweating and god everyone hopes he hasn't broken it.

At the main site Will is just finishing off tidying the camp for the evening round. Sure he's doing it early but everyone will be tired when they've finished their work for the afternoon. He looks up when Tobias comes rushing into the clearing, laboured breathing, he might even have run.

"Fred fell. He might have broken his ankle, sprained it at the very least. Have you got the first aid kit? I've got some painkillers in my tent. The others are looking after him. I'm sorry."

Will nods and reassure him.

"If it's a sprain we'll manage. Damn. Poor guy. He can't catch a break. He was bothered over lunch, we were going to talk." He stops in the middle of the thought that's racing away from him. He walks closer to Tobias and looks at him intently. "Toby, did anything happen? You know the light that distracted you? Did something bother Fred? Make him not look? Even something that might seem like an accident?"

Tobias shakes head and is keen to assure Will.

"No. No I'm sure of it, nothing like that. Really. I think he just fell over his own walking poles, or something. Too busy talking. Something. Fell over a root."

They carry on talking as Will rummages through the stuff sac he keeps the first aid bag in. When he starts on the walk back to the shelter clearing Tobias goes to his tent, finds the painkillers and then rushes to catch Will up.

Next to the shelters Fred is stretched out on the ground his arm over his face, teeth gritted at the pain. One of his boots is off and lying abandoned on its side near him. Matthew idly picks it up. Not quite sure what to do with it and also not wanting just to leave it lying around, her

another something any of them could fall over. As he stands there Tobias joins him, painkillers delivered to Hannibal to administer as seen fit.

“How’s he doing?”

Matthew makes a face.

“It’s not broken. Abel’s 98% sure of it. And I’d trust him on that. But even if we strap it Fred won’t be able to do much, Jack has been talking about getting him back so that he gets medical attention.” He lowers his voice. “He doesn’t want to abandon the trip. But he doesn’t want to abandon Fred either. I think they’re thinking about someone taking him back. We’d got an overnight here planned anyway. If we can have a second night here they could get Fred back and get back to us by the end of tomorrow. I know it seems like it’s been ages but it’s really only a long half day back and another to rejoin us. I’m willing. But we’re just waiting to see what Will says. It’s his call really.”

Tobias nods and looks at the rest of the little group. There is still something about this that is bugging him. Maybe it’s because of the concern on Will’s face. A contagion of anxiety? It works like that, rumour, gossip, speculation, what starts out as a flash of sunlight on a piece of glass becomes the end of all things. And in no time at all. Pandemics spread fast in the real world unless they’re checked at source. Nipped in the bud he thinks. This better be nipped in the bud. No point fuelling what’s only speculation.

Fred is partly sitting up now and his ankle is being firmly strapped by Will and Abel. Jack is talking to Fred, joshing him along, but more kindly than he’s sometimes wont to do. Hannibal is standing talking to Randall, perhaps debating the best course of action. Matthew nudges Tobias.

“You ok Toby? Something bothering you?”

Tobias shakes his head, as if to physically clear himself of the worry.

“Just thinking how easy it is to hurt yourself out here. And what it would be like if you were on your own. I wonder how Will manages.”

“He used to walk a bit with his dad he said. And he’s got Wendigo.”

Neither of them mention Hannibal. But it’s not behind the realms of possibility that it occurs to both of them that there might be considerably more trees in his future than Hannibal had ever previously considered.

When Fred has been made as comfortable as he can be they experiment with ways to walk him back to the main camp or back to Will’s cabin. Everyone dithers and eventually Will comes to a decision.

“Ok. Here’s a suggestion and Fred, for goodness sake, be honest how you feel about this. Everyone will stay here tonight. Frederick, you get the luxury of the tent to yourself. Everyone else? Shelters as planned. I know you want to press on, and, at the same time look after Fred. Good. That’s how it should be. So he gets to be comfortable. And everyone else,

as comfortable as they make themselves. In the morning someone will walk Fred back to my cabin. I'll tell you where the spare key is. If there's enough daylight for you to come back you'll come back and have tomorrow night with us. If there isn't, you can use my cabin overnight and come back the following morning at first light. We can wait for you. It means an extra night here, but I think that's the best of a miserable situation. At the cabin there's the usual stuff, and there are emergency numbers too, pinned up by the landline. I've got a satellite phone here, with me, but I think it would be just as easy to get Fred back this way, maybe quicker too. Even if we got hold of the Rescue guys, well, they'd take one look at him and then just walk him out of here. Same as we will."

Fred raises a hand, and Will manages to stem the urge to say that it isn't school and damn of course he gets a say.

"I'd like a sleep. That sounds good. And yes. Tomorrow. We'll have to share out the group food I've got. I am sorry. I can't think how it happened."

When Fred has been settled comfortably by the fire, some logs to hand if it starts to die down too far, he's lent a paperback book someone brought with them. They leave him there looking reasonably content and pain free.

At the shelter site it's a subdued group that carries on with their own creations. Will looks at them carefully. Interesting reactions he thinks. None of them seem to be doing especially well with a small crisis within their own group. It doesn't take much he thinks, for teams to fall apart. And Fred might act more as social glue than people realise. He spends twenty minutes helping Abel, then fifteen with Tobias. And then spends an hour with Randall and Matthew as they help each other out. Jack upon observing that it's easier to work on a shelter with someone else ropes in Hannibal to help with his and then they switch around. It goes faster that way. Eventually they all spend time working with each other, going round, adding to ones they think need more help.

"Ok folks. I'm going to show you how to make the doors now. You need these to be large than the entrances and in a rough semi-circle."

Using the long flexible hazel strands he twists three into a large circle and then ties it in place. He holds it up for them all to admire. Yup. A circle. He drops it on the ground and then weaves in a loose framework of hazel and chestnut across the whole thing. When it's done it's like a very bad shield with an awful lot of gaps.

"Ok now we cover this with leaves on one side, like half a pizza." He demonstrates again. "And now we do the whizzy bit." He folds the untopped side over the filling until the leaves are held between the two halves of the frame. He quickly ties the frame together round the edges and holds it up again. A half circle.

"And there we go. One door. Kinda like a hobbit door. When you get inside your shelter you pull it after you to seal off the end. I squally use a scarf or towel along the bottom edge just for the draught. But it works pretty well." He leans the door against his own unfinished shelter and everyone can see how it's meant to work.

“All right then. Have at it. Hannibal and Jack, when you’re done come back to the main site and I’ll sort you out for dinner things. I’m going to just check on Frederick.”

He starts back on the path back to the site and is surprised when Randall catches him up.

“Will. Listen. I don’t want to make a fuss. Ok. I get it. And Fred. I know it’s not a perfect solution all round. But I know I’m the best with maps, I’ll take him tomorrow. I’m not as fast as Matthew but I might manage it in a day. And it’s give me a chance to, well, lick my wounds in private. I hope you understand.”

Will nods and lets some of the tension he’s been carrying in his shoulders ease out of them.

“That seems like a good solution all round. Do you want to sleep in your tent tonight. Have the best chance of a good night’s rest? No one would hold it against you or think less of you for it.”

Randall laughs.

“If I wake up at 2 and can’t get back to sleep I’ll go back to the tent, otherwise I’ll give it a go. Why not. I can almost imagine it might be ok.”

He turns back on the path back to the shelters.

“Great. Thanks. I appreciate it Will. Really.”

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“You hear Randall offered to take Fred back?”

Hannibal nods, Jack passes him the bag of rice, and Hannibal shifts the lid off the wide mouthed titanium kettle, his sleeve tucked over his hand to protect him from the steam, and then he carefully tips the partially cooked grains in.

“Decent of him.”

Jack looks at Hannibal a little more closely, narrows his eyes. Ok. This is how Hannibal is going to handle it. Well, he is pretty good at playing his cards close to his chest. And damn it can’t be easy. Not right now.

“Yeah. Decent of him. Real nice. You on top of the onions?”

Hannibal sniffs.

“I think they are winning.”

.....

Late in the evening Will fetches his jacket from their tent and finds Hannibal putting together his overnight bag for the night in the shelter.

“Hey. Are you all right? You seemed a little distracted earlier.”

Hannibal looks up from his rucksack and then beckons Will closer. He pulls him down beside him on the bedding he has not yet packed and holds him close. He murmurs against his hair, conscious of the nearness of the rest of the tents and of everyone getting ready to take their things to the other site.

“I feel ridiculous saying it but I miss you. Tonight. I already miss you. And I feel uneasy. Tobias said the same to me over supper. Though he did also say one of the stories from last night gave him something like a nightmare, he is really very sensitive. And he feels not quite at ease.” He sighs. “He was reluctant to speak of it. But he is worried. He doesn’t want to be disruptive, but this accident of Fred’s has him rattled. I have given some thought to what you might think?”

It would be easy for Will to ease Hannibal’s concerns away, or to distract him. But he doesn’t.

“I understand I think. But, and I’d say this to the others too, without being rude about it you’re also all used to being close to invincible at work. I think this trip has thrown up more gaps and challenges than people anticipated, it seems simple enough on paper; gear, maps, hills, trees. Oh and a few people that you work with most of the time under difficult and adrenaline fuelled circumstances. But it’s different out here. Most of that skill, built up over years of experience and I can’t even imagine how many hours of training only counts for so much. The woods are lovely, but they’re not as easy as they look. Tobias almost fell, he’s probably just as rattled by that as by the story and by Fred. And he’s right to be. I told Jack we’d do nothing overtly risky, but everything has a danger. It’s just that here, you’re all far less familiar with the dangers than you would be at home, or in the city or the hospital. It’s all more in your face because of it. So. Yes. I hear what Toby is saying and I believe him, and I also think you need a few more days to start to trust each other in this context not just the one you’re used to.”

Hannibal doesn’t reply, though he does stroke his hand through Will’s hair as they lie there.

“It’s ok if I haven’t convinced you. I don’t expect to. But I have seen groups like yours work out how to be together in the woods. Usually around now there’s a blow up, or crisis. Fred is just a different kind of crisis. The next few days will show how you’re really doing, and, to be honest, it will make Jack’s team thing come alive, or it won’t. But at least it will show you where the cracks are. If you don’t already know. Do you know?”

Hannibal sighs then and kisses against Will’s hair, inhaling as he does so.

“I introduced a new element when I took up the fellowship. And I may have been somewhat standoffish. For all that we have been socially engaged I can see I have not been especially friendly.”

“Except maybe with Abel?”

“Yes. Abel. I like him, that’s certainly true, but we have barely socialised.”

“Well you quite like things you can enjoy solitarily even if they are done in groups. And I bet you read as much as I do.”

He lifts himself up then and wiggles up a little and kisses Hannibal softly.

“Takes time. All of it. Your group’s still at the forming stage really, here, on this trip and in the hospital. Don’t you think?” He pauses and kisses Hannibal again. A little more this time, a little deeper. Then he pulls back.

“And I bet you didn’t bank on finding someone with whom you had an Attachment and a soulbond when you decided to have a few years in the US. Right? Bet that’s thrown you. Just a little. Never mind the chemical revolution that’s probably going on right now in your endocrine system. Just think what it’s going to do to your social calendar, and your wardrobe. Hmm. Bet you hadn’t even looked at anything synthetic in terms of fabric for years. And yet here you are, composite fibre pants and all.”

Hannibal takes a deep breath and releases it slowly.

“I know you’re right. I just. I find myself uncertain.”

“And you’re not used to that either.”

Will kisses him again, but before it can develop into something more, as it could easily do, he pulls back and starts to pack more of the things Hannibal will need into his bag.

“Come on. One night. Just one night. Nothing too drastic is going to happen in just one night.”

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He’s right. Nothing does. And, in the morning, just after they’ve eaten breakfast and re-packed their two rucksacks Randall and Fred set out. Fred limping heavily and taking his time over it, but managing adequately, and not bitching about it. At the last twist in the path, as it winds away from the campsite they both turn and raise their hands in farewell. The group watches them go.

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

> Tiny bit of nsfw in the middle.. when it comes down to it Hannibal really is a possessive kind of Alpha..

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Over breakfast there is the gradual resumption of cheer amongst the remainder of the group, despite the change in the dynamic with Randall and Fred gone and the necessity of spreading the tasks between just six of them for the day.

When they've all eaten Will pulls himself out of his low camp chair and looks round the group, spread round one half of the circle of the fire. The wood is a little damp and the wind is such that the smoke is shifting around a 120 degree arc. Everyone keeps moving on the edge of the group to avoid being caught by it. Will rolls his shoulders and stretches his neck a little, still wrapped in a fleece buff, hiding the bonding mark. At least the weather today justifies it somewhat. Everyone pauses in what they're doing to look up at him.

"Ok. Jack, can you manage wood on your own? Matthew and Hannibal, food, Hannibal show Matt the ropes will you? We're going to eat something heavy from the packs today, so we don't have to carry it tomorrow. Someone has a bag of prunes, and there's some dried shredded pork, can you dig those bags out for me? Abel and Tobias can you do water? I'll step in where there's a need and keep the place tidy. How's the other site? You sleep ok?"

There's a low murmur of assent and Jack raises a hand a little halfheartedly.

"Is there somewhere we can maybe leave some glass bottles and come back and collect them another time?"

Will's lip twitches, then he smiles a little, and gradually the whole group laughs.

"You're hilarious. Honestly. Glass is a bitch to carry. And sure. Did you keep the lids? Stops things crawling inside that can't figure out how to get out again. Ok. So what we'll do is wash them, put the lids on, and we'll bury them and mark them and I'll come back this way some time and pick them up. How many?"

Jack glances round his colleagues. How many? Between them? He counts the show of hands.

"Six. Hip flask size. Well. Large hip flask size. We might have stayed up a bit late."

Will nods, and then smiles to himself a little and shakes his head.

“Which is why you all look like you slept and look a little wrecked too? Am I right? Hey. You’re adults and we’re not going very far today. Almost nowhere. So if I go to the other site is it looking fit for purpose right now?”

There’s faint shift amongst the group. Something not quite right, maybe a few looks carefully curated. And Matthew asks.

“Are we sleeping in the shelters again tonight?”

Will looks at him, his face is a little earnest and possibly worried.

“That was the idea. Why? Something happen?”

Matthew looks round at his colleagues.

“We might have used Fred and your shelters to add to the others.”

Will makes a kind of ‘and?’ gesture.

“And maybe Randall’s. And there may have been some incautious jumping on shelters to test them this morning too.”

They look like a bunch of school kids caught out doing something naughty by their responsible adult.

“Matthew? Honestly. Did you all sleep out last night? You did? Great job. You’re not on some kind of exam or award. You can sleep in your tents if you want to. It’s fine. And if you want to re-build a little during today you can do that too. I thought we might do a bit of wild food gathering through the day. Yeah. No squirrels, I haven’t got the traps here. If you’re really keen then we can do that later on. We could also walk to the lake to see the loons. You all heard them right? They’re a little late on the migratory route so they might be gone today or tomorrow. But if anyone fancies it we can fit that in this afternoon. If the water isn’t too bad you can swim if you want to. Otherwise? Maybe you need a little bit of a break? We’re a third through. I know you’re all used to going at things full throttle. But maybe ease off a little today. Sit around a bit, read, draw, write a letter home, which we can’t post but is a nice idea? Any questions?”

Nobody says anything so Will smiles.

“Ok then. Let’s get some extra water on so everyone can have a decent wash. Yeah. I know. And you can wash socks and stuff too. And who did I say was on food? Can you make some more coffee and tea? Great. Thanks. Let’s get to it.”

.....

Will walks along the short path to the shelter site with Wen at his heels. She’s sticking close to him and he wonders if she can smell something or sense something, even if it’s just his own modest disquiet. The light comes down through the late spring leaves dappling the ground. He passes the place where Fred fell yesterday, the ground scuffed and kicked around. For a moment he settles down on his haunches but there’s nothing to be seen. From where

he's half knelt he looks around. Nothing in the shadows beyond the light at the edge of the wood. Nothing above eye level either. Easy not to look up he finds. People tend to check below eye level. The local Wardens have learnt this the hard way when painting flashes to mark routes. No one looks up. They don't shout. They don't look up. There's no glint. Nothing. He can't see anything on the ground Fred could have tripped on either, no obvious protruding roots. He straightens up.

At the site Matthew and Abel are both rebuilding their own shelters. Will walks around and checks the others. They're all ok. And it was smart to take materials from his and Fred's shelters, both pragmatic and practical. Even though they still look a little guilty about it. He picks up a couple of bits of litter and finds that someone, probably Jack has placed what turns out to be seven glass bottles together, off to one side. All but one has its lid and Will knows he can probably rig something for the other one. He looks round the clearing for a suitable site for the burial and when he's worked it out he moves all the glass over there into a small neat pile.

By the side of the clearing near where he thinks Fred had his shelter he finds a walking boot. As he lifts it and walks back into the centre of the clearing Matthew comes over to him.

"It's Fred's. He wasn't able to put it on over the strapping on his ankle this morning. And actually I hoped he wouldn't. Have you looked at it?"

He frowns at Will and Will has to tear his eyes away from the look of sheer consternation on Matthew's face.

"Not yet? Why, what's the problem?"

As he asks he turns the boot over and runs his fingers carefully along the seams and the seal where the sole is welded to the upper. Matthew reaches for the boot and takes it from him.

"Look."

He twists the boot between his hands. When it's moved like that you can see the stitches all along one edge have been sliced through, and on the other side the weld has been cut. It means if you flex and twist your foot as you do when walking on uneven ground that it won't cripple you but it might cause you to stumble.

"I didn't want to say anything last night. I thought it would freak Fred out, and he's the one who's got to get back. Though I did check his other boot just to be sure. But, honestly? When I look at it in daylight, I think someone fucked around with it."

He stops then and hands it back to Will who twists it either way in his hands. He holds it up into the sunlight to get a better look.

"It's a neat job, isn't it. If you just put it on? Something unfamiliar? You probably wouldn't notice. And just looking at it like this? Hard to tell." He looks at Matthew, an echo of his concern in his face. "What made you check?"

Slowly Matthew shakes his head. He looks round the clearing, Abel has gone and it's empty except for Will and Wendigo, and the shelters.

"There's something wrong. I don't know what. I can't tell exactly what. And you and Hannibal? It's not that. I thought it was. I got distracted. I am distracted by it. I'm not gonna lie. But." He stops and looks around again. "Don't you feel it? Or are you too overwhelmed by everything else?"

For a moment Will says nothing, then he makes a sort of muted shrug, not dismissive, more like resigned.

"I think you're right on both counts. There is something. I thought that when Tobias told me yesterday. About Fred. But it's not that I'm off my game. It's more that.. yeah.. I'm not looking in the right direction. Not quite. And this?"

He shakes his head again, and hands the boot back to Matthew.

"Maybe hang on to this. We might need to talk about it to the others. Or Jack, at least."

Matthew tips his head, and says, a slight note of urgency in his tone.

"Be careful Will. Yeah? I don't know what's going on. But something is. Just.."

They look round, maybe a little guiltily, as Hannibal walks into the clearing. He eyes them both and frowns slightly. Ahh, shit Will thinks, this doesn't look great. Wen immediately gets up and pads over to Hannibal. He reaches down with just an outstretched hand to scratch at her ears.

"If I am not interrupting Jack would like the food cards for lunch."

He doesn't say anything more but turns on his heel and walks back along the path he's just come along. Beside him Matthew sighs and Will swears quietly under his breath.

"I'm just going to.."

"Yeah. I get it."

Matthew watches as Will walks quickly after Hannibal along the path back to the main site.

He looks down again at the boot and then walks over to his shelter and crouches down at the entrance before he reaches inside and stows it with his other gear.

.....

Idly Abel watches the interactions as the group washes up after lunch. Some of the earlier cheer has dissipated and Hannibal has been radiating annoyance for the last couple of hours. He looks at Will, sorting though the plates and pans, he is subdued and also possibly irritated. Or fretful. Or possibly all three.

"Will? I'm up for the loons, and you said something about wild food?"

Will shoots him a grateful look, but Abel can't help but notice that he throws a quick glance Hannibal's way as well. Ah. Yes. Trouble in newly bonded paradise. Well they're probably both all over the place emotionally and chemically, and everything else in between.

"Of course. Ok. Maybe ninety minutes time? We're pretty early yet. So if anyone wants to have a bit of a breather or sort their gear out now is the time. Then, if you gather anything you want for the afternoon. Anyone staying back?" Tobias raises his hand. "Ok then. Look after the fire, will you? Please. We'll be away for about four hours. Back at six thirty I'd guess. All right on your own?"

There is just a faint ripple around the group and Tobias squares his shoulders a little.

"As long as there are no bears? Or wolves? Or.. now I'm just worrying over nothing. How far is the lake?"

Will smiles and the rest of the group laughs a little, the tension easing between them.

"Not that far. Fifteen minutes. If I show you on a map, the trail is a straight run from here. And it's marked by yellow circles with a blue centre on the trees, away from the shelter clearing. I take people there from an overnight stop here all the time."

Tobias nods.

"That shouldn't be a problem then. I want to sort my gear better. Jack? Is that ok? I might take everything out of the tent?"

Jack shrugs and Tobias smiles back at his tent mate. "Good. Thanks. Will, I'm going to guess you want me to have water ready for when you all get back? If you give me the food cards I'll swop with Matthew and Hannibal for tonight."

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Over the next ninety minutes people sort their gear, tidy stuff up, burn their flammable litter, and sit around and rest a little. In their tent Will sits cross legged on his mat and regards Hannibal, sorting through socks and underwear. Will reaches a hand out to place it over his to still him.

"I know you're pissed. Nothing was going on."

Hannibal doesn't look at him, instead he detaches his hands from Will's grasp, refolds some clothes and stows them in a stuff sack.

Will takes a deep breath and moves across the mat to first lean against him and then hang both his arms round Hannibal's neck. He buries his face in the junction of his shoulder and throat, flush tight against the collar Hannibal is wearing. He waits for Hannibal to stop packing, and eventually he puts his arms round Will. Will kisses his neck through the collar.

"Possessive much Alpha?"

He wonders if he might have annoyed Hannibal further but he huffs a small laugh.

“Yes. I apologise. I’m being unreasonable I know.”

Will slides around a little so he is closer to kneeling across Hannibal’s lap and then kisses him. He’s relieved that Hannibal kisses him back with no hesitation. Then runs his hands up and down Will’s back sliding his hands under the waist band of Will’s pants as he does so. Will tilts his face a little and holds Hannibal’s face between his hands and deepens the kiss, pushing further into Hannibal’s mouth with his tongue. Hannibal pulls him closer against him and lets them fall back onto Will’s bed roll, still kissing and still entwined.

He pushes a hand further inside Will’s pants down into his underwear and squeezes. Will tries not to make any noise as Hannibal uses his other hand to undo the tie at the front of Will’s soft pants and then pulls them down, repeating the action with his underwear. He rolls them so Will is below him and then holds Will round his upper back with one hand and reaches down with the other between his legs. He kisses him further. Dipping his tongue in. Sucking on Will’s tongue. Stroking along the roof of his mouth. Will clings tight with his arms round Hannibal’s neck and gasps against his mouth when Hannibal pushes inside him with two fingers. Hannibal noses against the fleece buff around Will’s neck until he has bared the bonding mark and then sucks gently on it as he continues to work Will open with his fingers.

Will stops thinking, or worrying about the gasps he is making when Hannibal adds a fourth finger and thrusts more vigorously.

“Fuck. Hannibal. Fuck. That’s. Fuck. Please.”

In Will’s ear he whispers.

“Tell me what you want my Omega.”

Will arches his back and comes on an especially hard twist of Hannibal’s fingers. He promptly divests himself of his own trousers and underwear and pushes Will’s legs apart and then up so he’s more open and pushes in. Will scrunches up his eyes. Fuck. He’s so wet with slick and his own ejaculate and his mate is practically growling above him as he pushes harder and deeper. And god he’s going to knot him. Will feels just a little desperate and out of control, and fuck, probably Hannibal does too, as he makes a long low anguished noise just before he comes. They both lie there, rocking with each other as Hannibal’s knot pulses again and again. Will gasps and shifts, the knot catching on him, both pain and pleasure mingling together.

“Fuck. You. Have. To. Give. Me. A. Little. Warning.”

Hannibal murmurs something against his neck. And comes again. Will puts his head back and Hannibal lowers him carefully to the bed roll. Still joined.

“I’m going to have to take a suppressant every day. It’s not enough.”

Will kisses him on the cheek and they lie together. A little uncomfortable. But a little more settled.

“Sorry. Alpha thing? Right?”

“I imagine so. Marking my territory. Staking a claim. I’m not entirely sure, it seems imperative. To have you.”

Will kisses him softly.

“Still yours Hannibal. And honestly, as soon as I’m off suppressants..” he trails off. “You’d like that I think. Straight away?” Hannibal nods against his throat, his knot still tying them tightly together. “I think so. You?” Will kisses him again. Then closes his eyes and tries to relax. “Yeah. Straight away.”

It takes another ten minutes for the knot to subside. In the meantime they murmur quiet things to each other. Promises. Kindness. And Will holds Hannibal when he eases out and lies beside him. They both sigh a little.

“Thirty minute snooze. Then we’re going to see the loons.”

Hannibal smiles.

“I can think of little I’d rather.”

Will snorts.

“Liar..... better?”

“Yes.”

.....

Will stands up outside the tent and only Tobias is there, sitting by the fire, reading a paperback.

“The others went on ahead. That’s ok isn’t it?”

Will flushes and rubs the back of his head with a hand.

“Yeah. Of course. Just, err..”

Tobias smiles faintly at him

“As a medical professional I’m bound to say something about chemical, psychosocial, and biological imperatives driving the bonding link. As someone with a partner of my own I think if I wore spectacles I’d just give you a look over them.”

He smiles a little more widely and goes back to his book.

Will leans back down and into the tent. Hannibal looks up at him with a query on his face.

“Will?”

“Yeah? Well. Not quiet enough. Everyone except Toby has gone to the lake. And I’m not embarrassed at all.”

He holds up a hand.

“It’s ok. Honestly. This is already a bit of a cluster fuck. I’m going to have to talk to Jack, or apologise. Or, I don’t know.”

Hannibal looks at him steadily.

“Actually, I realise this is entirely my fault, I think perhaps I’ll go on ahead and explain about the suppressants, I might even ask for suggestions.”

Will blows out his cheeks. Doctors he thinks. They’re all doctors. They must see incredibly embarrassing things all the time. It’s just bodies he tells himself fiercely. Just bodies. And goddam it, biology. And it would be good if Hannibal could get some input. For fucks sake, they can’t fuck like bunnies every time they’re in an enclosed space together. And Hannibal has to get a handle on his possessiveness. And Will on his.. whatever the fuck it is which means he just wants to whine and roll over and beg to be knotted if he even looks at Hannibal.

He sighs.

.....

Tobias watches as Will leaves the clearing. When Hannibal had left a short time before they’d exchanged a few words and it has given Tobias some pause for thought. Not easy for them, not easy at all. And with this thing with Fred? Some awkward things to navigate there, between the two of them, and between the group as a whole. Jack’s team building exercise? Yeah. At a whole different level now he thinks.

He turns back to the fire and the paperback book Fred left behind. Randall’s name is pencilled in the front, ‘The Consolations Of the Forest.’ It’s been translated into English and if he’s honest with himself it isn’t exactly what he’d imagine as a natural fit for what he knows of Randall and his tastes. Maybe it was a gift from someone. He leans forward for a moment and shifts one of the small kettles closer to the flames, perhaps he’ll make a drink.

He settles back and rests the book open on his knee. With Will’s departure the natural noises of the woods are gradually reasserting themselves. Birdsong. Wind in the tops of the trees. The rustle of small things in the nearby undergrowth. Further away he can hear something larger in the dark of the trees. He looks around. Beyond the edges of the clearing where the light leaches only a few yards into the woods it is dark and shadowed. And still. Terribly still. But there’s something there. Too small for a bear he hopes. Way too small. Isn’t it? And only in one place. So just one thing. Not a herd. Or worse. Not a pack.

He shivers. God, it’s easy to be fanciful out here. Easy to imagine the worst, if you’re that way inclined, which he thinks he might be. Easy.

A cloud scuds across the sun changing the way the light falls on the grass and scrub around him, like the fingers of ghosts, tendrilling a loose touch on the nape of his neck. He shivers again.

The book catches his attention once more and he manages another twenty pages or so before he remembers the kettle. The hiss of steam escaping indicates it's been boiling away for a while. He pulls himself out of the chair and hunches round the fire until he clasps the tea tin and gets it open and shoves a tea bag into one of the clean mugs drying on an improvised rack next to the fire. He uses the small holder hanging over the drier by a loop to pick up the kettle and then pours boiling water into the mug.

When he sets the kettle down he looks at the quilted red and blue holder. Something prompts him to lift it to his nose. It's very slightly scented. Padded he thinks. With lavender. And some kind of insulating material so you can pick things up and not worry about burning yourself. Will's he guesses. He's an endearing mix of deathly practical and sweetly sentimental. It's a killer combination he thinks, and it puts him in mind of Franklyn.

Before he settles back down into his seat he sets his tea down to brew and then walks over to his and Jack's tent. Once he's crawled inside he rootles around, and from his rucksack he pulls out a spiral bound note pad, and a pen shoved down into the coil.

Back at the fire he fishes the tea bag out with the end of the pen and throws it into the embers where it hisses and steams. He sets back down in his chair, opens the note pad, and begins to draft a letter to Franklyn.

.....

At the millpond still water Will smiles at the group and proceeds to point out the clump of fungi close to one of the small streams that feeds the lake.

"Ok folks. Thanks for that. And honestly, we both, well, thank you. Ok. So. This is one of a number of edible fungi we'll find around here. And before I go any further don't for fuck's sake randomly pick something and try it. Remember what I said about the hemlock? Same is true for fungus. Even the things that look like ordinary field mushrooms? Those ones. Just there, base of the tree. They're not. They're part of the destroying angel family. No testing even. The only mushrooms we're going to eat are the dried ones I've packed with us. Same's true of the greenery. This?" He stops and picks a small leaf, and holds it out to the group, indicating what he means. "Looks really like several other things you can eat, but if you look at the reverse of the leaf? There's a vein that runs around the edge." He hands it round the group and everyone leans in to look. "See? Just here. It's in the lily family, don't eat it. It might not kill you. Probably. But you're guaranteed to have a very miserable time of it. And don't let's even get started on seeds and berries. And just because birds and other mammals eat them? Still no guarantee."

There's a small silence in the group and Jack asks.

"Ok. So no grazing or sampling. We get it. But that one's edible? Sure as fuck doesn't look edible?"

Will smiles and bends down to pick up the small red fungus.

"I know. Looks like it'd knock you side ways doesn't it? Scarlett Elf Cup or Cap. It's one of the problems with wild food identification, different people call the same thing by different

names. We can cook it. It's good. But like I say. Don't pick it. Don't eat it. I teach a whole week long thing about wild edibles and even then we sort every single thing back at camp before we actually eat anything. And some things are only edible in season. The older they are the less digestible they are, or vice versa. Some things need to get past particular growth stages before you can eat them."

He looks round the concerned faces of the group.

"Hey, it's not so bad. Guess which vegetable we all use that wouldn't pass the stringent toxicity tests of the USDA these days? No ideas? Onions. Ordinary onions. I know. So don't get too worried about it. Just be sensible. Ok. So this is almost impossible to get wrong, everyone pick a few and we'll add them to dinner tonight."

He sees the looks on their faces.

"Ok. I'll check every single one and no one has to eat them. Ok?"

There's a murmur of agreement and the men all spread themselves along the bank of the stream looking for the shy, striking and happily unmistakeable fungus.

.....

At the campsite Tobias tears the pages out of the notebook and folds his letter to Franklyn in half and then slides it into an envelope he had stowed in the back of his note book. He turns the envelope over and licks the closure and seals it and then writes Franklyn's name on the front. He smiles a little to himself. Nice idea of Will's, and something for Franklyn to smile at later. He knows his partner smiles at his idiosyncrasies, but that's ok, it's one of the reasons they work well together.

He stretches his legs out. These low camp chairs are better for the back than just sitting on the ground but you can still stiffen up if you sit around for too long. He picks up Randall's book again and then thinks to check his watch. A little after five thirty. Maybe he ought to start on dinner soon. Maybe another ten minutes. He puts the envelope in the back of the pad and puts the whole thing in his pocket.

He reads another few pages and finds it slightly less satisfying this time, maybe, he tips the book to the back and checks the last few pages, reads there instead. He finds the ending more to his liking and is about to put the book down when he flicks the last few pages and finds there are pencilled notes there. He frowns. It looks like Fred's handwriting.

"Hey. How is it going? You ok? Where are the others?"

Tobias sets the books aside and smiles up at Randall.

"Hey yourself, and I've got to say, you made good time. How's Fred doing?"

"We were lucky. We ran into those friends of Will's, the girl and her dad. They were checking something out for a client, I think, some group, kids. They were great actually, decided to take Fred back."

Randall smiles at his colleague, then drops his rucksack down on the ground upwind from the fire. He sets his walking poles down more carefully.

“I’m knackered. Will you make me a coffee or something. Where are the others?”

“Sure. Sit here. I’ve got to get on with supper anyway. Oh. This is your’s.”

Tobias hands Randall the book and as he sits he glances at it and then shoves it into his jacket pocket.

“Thanks. I lent it to Fred he said he’d left it here.”

Tobias gets on with making him a drink and then they both make a start on the supper.

“He is organised isn’t he?”

Randall reads through the recipe card for pork and prune sauce and watches as Tobias mixes some powdered egg with some water for the egg fried rice he’s got ready on the edge of the fire.

“Who? Will? Yes. I think he knows what he’s doing. And despite everything.”

He looks at his colleague.

“Are you alright?”

Randall shrugs his shoulders and passes the cards back to Tobias.

“How do we cook this crumble mix?”

Tobias turns over one of the cards Randall gave him.

“Oh. Clever. We cover the base of the big pan with oil, heat it, spread the mix over it and then add a cup of water. And cover. It will kind of steam and fry and I think that should work. And then we add the rest of the reconstituted dried fruit. And cover again. Can you do that?”

Randall nods.

“Yeah. Sure. I’m ok. And thanks for asking. A bit.. well, a bit pissed off about it, but I can see it was all just one of those things. I can. Well. I know there are meds.” He makes a noise, maybe a little anger or fear or frustration in there. “Hurts like a bitch right now.” He looks at Tobias. “That’ll pass right? Unrequited isn’t so bad as broken is it?”

Tobias nods. He carries on with what he is doing until he can get the rice frying and tip the egg in at the side and cook it before mixing it in.

“It isn’t. Takes a bit of time. But if you meet someone else? It will pass. The others are at the lake. Sorry. I should have said. Went to see the loons, do some wild food thing, have a dip.”

Randall laughs.

“Ok. Well I’m not sorry to miss that, I don’t think I fancy a dip in a pond this early in the year.” He sees Tobias smile. “You thought the same thing didn’t you? And I think I’ll pass on the wild food thing. Too easy for that to go wrong. Even though I’m sure Will knows what he’s about. What have you been doing?”

“Mooching about, I tidied out the tent. Wrote to Franklyn, yeah, I know, I thought he’d like it. Read most of your book. Not your usual thing is it?”

Randall laughs.

“God no. Actually Matt gave it to me. It was on a list Will recommended. I’ve managed the first five pages. Hey..”

Both he and Tobias turn at the sound of the rest of the group returning from the lake.

“Randall! Man you must have run all the way! You ok? How’s Fred.”

Matthew claps his friend on the shoulder and hunkers down beside him at the fire. As the others arrive the group slowly shifts into the evening routine. Water is collected. More wood is added to the pile and Will sorts all the fungus carefully before sponging it clean of any dirt clinging to the cups.

Tobias watches as he gets a small pan and adds some oil and then the bright red fungus and cooks them fast over a part of the fire already settled to hot embers.

“Scarlet elf cap. I’ve told everyone they don’t have to eat them. If they’re worried. You too. Toby. Ok?”

Tobias smiles at Will.

“Hey. I trust you.”

.....

Over supper Randall enjoys explaining about how he and Fred ran into Garret and Abigail and how nice they were. Fred had improved in mood, although by the end he was practically hopping and using both his walking poles as kind of crutch, clutched tightly in one hand.

“I would have taken him all the way back but Mr. Hobbs said they’d be just as quick without me. I think they were going to head straight down to their place? Does that sound right Will?”

Will chases the last of some crumble and custard around his plate and nods in agreement.

“It does. Do you know where you were? There’s a path that cuts down off the main trail which circles round to the back of their lot. I’d guess around there?”

Randall shrugs a little. He takes a mouthful of coffee from a mug and winces at how cool it has gone.

“Ahh. I’ll admit I didn’t check the map. I just turned around and came back up. Oh and that place where you used the friends in the rockface? Someone has put some rope along there. Tied it on at either end round a sapling and threaded it through. That wasn’t you was it?”

Will shakes his head, he hadn’t wanted to cut the length he’s got with him. But it’s good idea.

“Not me. But there’s people up here this way all the time.”

When washing up is done Will does the whole end of day round up.

“Ok. Randall, first off, thank you for helping Fred. And for making such fast time. It means we can set off tomorrow morning. So. That means breakfast at 8, then pack up and clear out. We’re actually heading towards a place called Rust Peak, and barring disaster we’ll be there day after tomorrow. Tomorrow we’ll probably get as far as one of the other places where there’s a permanent bivi shelter, there’s more food there. Tonight though, if you want to sleep in the shelters please do.” He pauses and takes a deep breath. “I should warn you, it’s going to rain tonight. Like earlier in the week, so if you prefer it I won’t be surprised if you stick to the tents. Randall, yours may have been recycled into one of the others but I imagine there’s going to be a least one free tonight.” He smiles at the group in sympathy. “No prizes for sticking it out. But you might want to find out if your shelter building skills are equal to a bunch of twelve year olds.”

He manages not to smile to himself when he sees several of the group sit up straighter as though accepting the challenge.

“Ok. So. Rota tomorrow. Randall and Hannibal on wood and fire. Jack and Abel on water and cat holes. Matthew and me on food and washing up. Tobias you on tidying up?”

He looks round the group.

“I know. It makes it a little tighter. We’ll manage. Just make sure no one else falls over? Ok? Now, if you didn’t drink all the booze last night we can have a hot drink once everyone’s sorted out their night stuff, with maybe a little something in it? And once we’re all back here, I’ll kick off with a story for you. Hey did I tell you the bean one?”

There’s a chorus of groans. He smiles.

.....

At about three in the morning the rain sets in. It’s loud enough that it eventually wakes Wen, and she wakes Will with a paw to his face, the two of them alone in their tent. Hannibal, like Matthew and Tobias and Randall opting to spend the night in the shelters.

There’s a flash, and just for a moment the whole interior of the tent is lit by the bright whiteness of sheet lightning. He waits a few moments for the rumble. Ten seconds. If it lasts for more than half an hour he’ll have to check on the other tents and the shelters. There’s another sharp crack and then a sound he has come to dread. The sound of something large falling. Maybe a branch or a tree. Damn.

He grabs his boots from beside the front door and then his poncho. He looks at Wen.

“Stay... ok...Good girl.” He reaches out strokes her head and neck, she sits there on her haunches panting at him, the hair all along her nape sticking straight up. She’s not a big fan of thunderstorms and she makes a low miserable noise in the back of her throat.

“I know. Crap isn’t it. I’ll be back. Look after things. Good girl.”

He rubs her neck again and she settles back down on her blanket still whining a little.

He unzips the tent and backs out and his poncho is immediately flung around him. The wind has got up and he can see the sides of the other tents shifting under the constant battering of both the wind and rain. He ties his poncho by the loops between his legs and then fits his head torch on and switches it to the brightest setting.

Two of the pyramid tents have lights on inside and he pushes against the rain to the first. He has to shout to make himself heard.

“Jack? You ok?”

He hears a grunted assent from inside. And he walks around and checks the lines and pegs. When he sees it’s ok he moves on to the next tent.

“Abel? All right?”

“Oh yeah. Peachy. When you said rain I didn’t know you meant the apocalypse. Who ordered that?”

“I’m just going to check the lines, and then the others at the other site. Stay here. Ok? You’re not under anything. Nothing will come down on you? You chose wisely.”

Abel doesn’t answer for a moment and then shouts back.

“I hadn’t even thought of that. Fuck’s sake. Ok. I’m going nowhere. Be careful Will.”

Will straightens and then checks the empty tent that Randall and Matthew are using. He looks around shining his head torch over the whole clearing. All around there are small branches and leaves torn from their roots, but nothing too major. Not what he heard come down then.

He turns to the path to the shelters and pushes against the wind and rain in his face. Fuck’s sake he thinks to himself.

Just before the clearing there is a tree down across the path. Not so big it’s insurmountable but it’s still a pain to get over. He manages, scratching himself and ripping one end of his waterproof. In the clearing three of the men have dragged themselves out of their shelters and are standing somewhat huddled in the middle. Will pushes towards them and then shouts.

“How long have you been up? Where’s Randall.”

Matthew grabs his arm.

“He’s not in his shelter. I only just woke up, it was the tree coming down. Didn’t fancy getting stuck under one.”

Will looks round at Hannibal and puts a hand on his shoulder.

“Ok?”

Hannibal raises his eyebrows and the next flash of lightning catches across his face casting sharp shadows.

“Better for seeing you are all right. Is this usual?”

“Rain yes? Wind? Yes? This kind of storm? Not so much.” He looks at the others to include them in what he is saying. “Ok. We have to get back to the other site. It should be safe enough here, but the storm will at least partly dismantle the shelters. No point in having a worse night. We have to get over the tree that came down.” He stops for a moment. “Damn. I should have brought a saw.”

Tobias clutches at his arm and shouts.

“I’ve got one. From earlier. I meant to put it back with the others. Let me get it.”

He’s back only a few minutes later and Will takes it and unfolds it gratefully. He still has to shout to be heard.

“Ok. We’ll take of some of the worst branches. Not many. Just to make it easier. Fuck. I hope Randall..”

He pauses. Where the hell can he be.

At the fallen tree they spend half an hour struggling to clear some of the lowest branches to make it easier to get over, by then the wind has abated a little though the rain is coming down just as hard. There is still no sign of Randall.

Eventually back at the main camp site the four men stand there, next to the rain extinguished fire. The torrential rain still sluicing down, creating gullies in the soil following the slight incline of the site. Will shouts to them.

“Tobias, Jack was awake not so long ago, his lantern’s still on. Go and reassure him will you. Matt, don’t piss around, go and get dry. Yeah? Matt. I’ll find Randall. Ok? I know you’re worried. I’ll find him. Go and make some space in the tent. You’ll both be soaking. Ok? Please?”

Matthew looks like he is about to argue but then he shakes his head and turns for his tent. Hannibal looks at Will.

“I can’t let you go on your own.”

Will laughs, rain streaming down his face and hair. He puts both arms briefly round Hannibal.

“Hey. This is nothing. It’s just a little rain.” There’s a flash of lightening and then a crash of thunder a few seconds later. “Ok, and full on accompaniment. Go check on Wen. She was scared. She hates thunderstorms. I’ll be fine.”

Hannibal slowly releases him, and makes an unhappy face.

“Be careful. Please.”

Will leans in and kisses him briefly.

“Look after her. I’ll be back soon.”

.....

Chapter End Notes

And about wild food... just, don’t. I’ve spent years learning this stuff and I’m still fanatically careful about it.

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

> I've been in Canada and the USA for the last month and have had the sheer joy of travelling along most of the route of the Appalachian Trail.
>
> After twenty years of pining for it I finally got to stand on it in several places. When we crossed Blood Mountain (the one in the story is based on it) there might have been a few tears. And honestly the Great Smokey Mountains are something else. The autumn colours are outstanding, and Gatlinburg, nestled in a pocket of the park is a hoot. (Yeah, I know, don't at me.)
>
> I'm planning on walking it in 2020. If you're in the area it'd be awesome to do a stretch with you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

> The rain continues to sluice down. Will leans into it as he struggles along the path that will take him to the cat-holes. The markers stuck along the way still give off a faint glow when the beam from his head torch hits them. He cannot imagine where Randall can be if he's not here.
>
> At the small clearing where someone on water duty obediently dug three holes there's no one. The trees still dip and writhe around him, the rush of rain through the leaves disorienting if you were easily shifted off course. He checks around. It's hard to tell if anyone has been here recently. There's no paper roll, no uncovered waste, no hastily abandoned trowel. And the rain is still coming down hard enough to mean someone would probably prefer to piss in the woods rather than come all the way here. He wipes somewhat futilely at his glasses.
>
> God, if Randall just decided to step off the path to take a leak and got turned around somehow? It doesn't bear thinking about. Though he'll have to. And what a night to lose someone.
>
> The rain eases a little as he walks quickly back, branches still shifting uneasily, like a giant hand running its fingers through the tree cover. Back at the main site he drops into a crouch by the entrance to Matthew and Randall's tent.
>
> "Matthew? Randall? Is he back?"
>
> Matthew's reply is instant.
>
> "He's not. Should I come with you?"

“It’s ok. Stay dry. I just checked the cat holes. Are you sure he was in one of the shelters last night?”

Matthew pauses just for a moment and then answers.

“Yeah. He took Jack’s. We’d recycled his. Are you going back there?”

“I am. Don’t worry. I’ll find him.”

He sighs to himself because this means he’ll have to get over the fallen tree again. But he has to try.

At the tree he finally caves into the relentless wetness that’s found its way underneath his waterproof and takes off his poncho. He weights it down where the tree meets the ground and then gets himself over the trunk again. It is easier without both the poncho and the wind whipping round it. On the other side of the trunk he sinks into the mud almost ankle deep.

At the site he finds that most of the shelters have been almost demolished. There’s still some gear, but lots of the leaf litter has been blown around and some of the basic structures have slipped sideways. But there’s still no one here.

He looks down the path that leads to the lake. Maybe Randall saw the markers and followed them blindly. Yellow and blue to the lake, just yellow to the main site? Maybe he missed that bit of conversation, went the wrong way? He pushes down the path. He has to look.

Fifteen minutes later he arrives at the lake utterly soaked through, water dripping down his neck. The rain and wind kicks up small wavelets all across its surface, the placid calm of earlier in the day long past. The noise here is somehow more concentrated as he clears the tree canopy to stand at the edge of the water. He knows there’s no use shouting but he does it anyway.

“Randall!!! RANDALL.”

He doesn’t do the thing of shouting his family name. So many people do, when they actually shout for someone. As though there could be multiple Randalls out here. Lost. Oh god, he thinks again. Lost.

“RANDALL!!!”

The wind drops for a moment and he thinks he hears something. Then there’s a sudden gust of rain, then a quiet again. He shouts some more. And hears an answer. Fuck it had better be him and not some random campers.

He turns back towards the path, where he thought he heard someone. And up against one of the pines he can see Randall crouched down at the base. He walks quickly to his side and kneels just in front of him, one knee in the muddy earth.

“Fuck. Are you hurt? How did you get here?”

Randall looks at him wildly.

“I got lost. I got fucking lost. I never get lost. Oh god. I followed the circles. I got lost.”

He thinks Randall might cry and puts a hand carefully out, so Randall can reject it if he wants to or accept it if he needs it.

Randall leans his head against Will’s shoulder.

“Oh god. That scared me. I just thought I should stay put. I didn’t want to risk it. I heard that tree come down. I’d meant to go and take a piss. Fuck. I’m such an idiot. I just went the wrong way.”

“Are you hurt at all. Scared I get. I’m scared. Fuck. I might even have been terrified when Matt said you weren’t in your shelter. Ok. Can you walk. I’m shaking. I don’t know how you are.”

“I can walk. I’m a bit.. fuck.. god that turned around so fast.”

They help each other stand and Will holds out a hand, and is relieved when Randall grabs a hold of his wrist to stay close.

“It’s easing off. Let’s get back. We can make you something warm, get you into dry clothes.”

They stumble back to the shelter clearing, and then over the fallen tree and along the path to the main site. By the time they arrive the rain has almost stopped and the grey pre-dawn reveals a camp that has lost some of its pristine preparedness. Matt and Jack are by the fire pit, talking and gesticulating, and they both turn in relief when Will and Randall arrive.

Randall gasps at them.

“Took a wrong turn. Waited at the lake. Thought I’d be there until morning.”

Matt grabs his friend into a hug.

“Fucker. You’re an idiot. And you’re soaked. Come on. We’ll get you dry. Try not to drip water everywhere.”

Randall leans against him for a moment.

“Yeah. Alright. Ok. And Will?”

He turns and looks at Will.

“Thanks.”

Will simply nods. It’s enough. And maybe something shifts, just a little, between them.

.....

In his own tent Hannibal is leaning in one of the low chairs with Wen sitting against his chest, he is grateful for the soft grounding touch of her wet muzzle against his hand. She whines

when Will undoes the zip and does the usual contortionist thing of getting into the tent without spraying water or earth everywhere.

“Before you ask, he’s fine. I found him. I’m ok too. Just wet through. Have you got a towel to spare?”

Wen wiggles her way towards him and leans over and licks his face as he starts to dry himself with the towel Hannibal hands him.

“Yeah. Good girl. Not helping. But good girl. You whinged at Hannibal yeah?”

Hannibal runs a hand along her back and flank.

“She has been an effective reassurance.”

Will smiles at him.

“Good. Honestly, it’s not as bad as it looks. It’s just rain. And tomorrow? Well, a little mud. And we might need to use some fuel cubes to get anything hot to drink or eat. But the only really shit thing was the tree coming down. I normally get to them if they’re looking at all vulnerable. Nasty.”

Hannibal looks at him silently as he pulls off his top layers and then wriggles out of his pants.

“What? Hannibal?”

“I was terrified for you. What might happen.”

Will stops drying himself and puts the towel aside.

“It’s worse than the usual rain and wind we get this time of year. But it’s not exceptional. It’s one of the worst storms I’ve had a group go through, but really it’s not that unusual.”

Hannibal holds out the arm that is not embracing Wen and Will shifts until he can lean on him too. He strokes Wen and then lifts his face and kisses Hannibal’s jaw.

“Ok. Move over because I’m cold and you’re warm. And damn. Gotta get up in a couple of hours. Come on.”

They rearrange themselves until they’re more or less a tangled heap under both their quilts and the large blanket and some of Wen.

Hannibal almost compulsively strokes his hand through Will’s hair. Still unsure how to convey the depths of his concern. Will though yawns widely.

“I’m beat. I’m going to sleep. You make a good pillow.”

He snuggles a little and whilst it might lighten the dread in Hannibal’s chest he feels the residual adrenaline leak along his system like a trail of nightmares. He listens to what is now just a rustle of leaves and the dripping of water off them. A punctuation of noise interrupting

his thoughts. He's not sure he really sleeps but he feels Will relax against him, his breath gusting evenly across his chest, falling into sleep.

.....

In the morning everyone stumbles into the camp circle round the fire. Will looks around at their faces, pinched and tired in the washed out light of another early day, another one following a broken sleep parched night.

"Yeah. I get it. Ok folks. We'll use the stoves for breakfast. We just need mugs, bowls and pans or kettles if you've got them. Don't worry about the woodpile. I can come back up in a week or so and sort it out. You did great last night. I know it was a bit much. You all did a good job. Thanks."

The group stirs itself and everyone troops back to their tents to collect their stoves and fuel.

Half an hour later each person has at least one hot drink under their belt; coffee or tea or chocolate. Whatever their poison is. And it's perked them up. Will doles out dry oatmeal into bowls or mugs and with the addition of boiling water and a fast stir and maybe a burnt lip or two the group gradually settles into something that approaches a more normal breakfast. Randall manages a small joke, the group laughs, and things more or less click back into place.

Crisis averted Will thinks. Though it will need a more thorough debrief later. For Randall's sake if not for the rest of the group.

.....

After breakfast Jack starts in with rallying everyone around and then urges Matthew and Tobias to come to the shelters to collect any remaining gear they'd abandoned in the dark and rain the previous night. Will eyes him and asks Gideon.

"He always like this after an issue?"

Abel carries on trying to roll out and dry his bivvi bag at the same time. He glances up from where he's kneeling.

"Jack? Sure. Any time there's a problem in or for the team. He deals with the thing then there's a group pep talk. Keep us on track. As a team. You know? Don't you do that with groups out here?"

Will nods agreement.

"True enough. Helps us all face in the same direction after."

He walks over to Jack.

"I'll come along in a bit. I think you got this. Mind the tree as you go over it. If you find my waterproof that'd be great. Stuffed down on the near side at the base. Thanks. We'll get things moving along here."

.....

Tobias and Jack survey the wreckage at the shelter site. After moving a smush of sticks and leaf detritus they find Randall's pack. Heartened by the discovery of the damp but otherwise undamaged rucksack they try each of the wind wracked piles and slowly they begin to collect all the gear. It's mainly backpacks, a couple of sleeping mats stuffed into bivvi bags, and a sleeping quilt that Tobias thinks is Fred's. Whilst they're doing this Matthew trails round the edges of the clearing to check if anything has blown into the undergrowth that circles it.

Truth be told Matthew is keen to find the boot that Frederick discarded. The damaged one that he'd showed Will and that he's pretty sure he stowed inside his own shelter. It's not there now, but nor is the shelter. Not really. So, instead, using his walking pole he moves bedraggled kudzu to one side, and keeps a wary eye out for poison ivy or sumac and for anything with thorns. All he gets for his efforts is a half soaked trouser leg where he tries to move things aside with his foot. He finds another waterproof though, so that's something. But the boot? There's no sign of it.

Of course it could be lying half buried somewhere. And it's not of a colour that's easy to spot in the mud splattered dripping greenery. Nevertheless surely it shouldn't be that hard to find. Surely it was heavy enough not to have been blown anywhere, not in the dense underbrush that lines the circle?

He moves a little around the edge and then approaches Will as he clambers over the fallen tree and joins the group.

"Matthew? Ok? You all right?"

He frowns as Matthew glances back towards where Tobias and Jack are shifting another destroyed shelter and steps closer to Will so he can speak more quietly.

"I don't guess there's any reason to wonder, but that boot I showed you isn't here."

Will looks at him sharply.

"You've checked?" He sees the look of consternation on Matthew's face. "Of course you have. Thanks."

He looks around them. Then back at Matthew.

"What are you thinking?"

Matthew shrugs a little.

"What am I thinking? I'm thinking I don't like it. But I also have no clue about who would want to hurt Fred. Or anyone. Why would they. Yeah. Ok. But that's just one to one stuff, you, Hannibal, Randall, Ok, me too. A bit. But why Fred? I don't get it?"

Will nods, and a thought or two curdles together in his mind.

“What if he saw something? Something he didn’t understand at the time, something he made sense of later.”

Matthew stares at him.

“Ok. Maybe. I suppose. But he might have told Randall. On the walk back? We could ask him. Yeah. I know that too. But if it involves Randall he’ll prevaricate or something. We’d know. Don’t you think? We’d know.”

“Will you ask him? Tell him about the boot?”

“I can do that. Probably better coming from me. Though you’d think after last night it would be better between you.”

Will shrugs a little and then nods, he can only hope so.

.....

When the group has finished rescuing all their gear they reassemble at the fire pit. Will has managed to get the main fire going again enough for hot water to be ready for drinks to go with a snack.

“We’ll finish packing up the tents, stow all the gear and get going. There’s a dip below, then a bit of a steep climb. Make sure you’ve got your walking poles to hand. You’ll be glad you did. And your knees will be especially grateful. At the top there’s an escarpment we’ll walk along for a couple of miles. It’s rocky, so watch how you go, don’t want any twisted ankles again. One’s enough for all of us. The rain might have made some things a little twitchy. Keep an eye out for snakes. If you sit down watch for crevices or cracks. Don’t go poking around in the undergrowth. If you need to piss watch where you step off the path. I’m being a drag. But forewarned is forearmed. And honestly the view from the top is worth the trek.” He smiles broadly round the group. “Ok then. Fifteen minutes? Great.”

.....

Conversation reestablishes itself as the group walks along. What had been a somewhat subdued set of trail grabbers gradually gathers pace and its own kind of humour. Everything is still damp and Will suspects that several days of rain on the trot would severely test them. For all that they’re used to uncomfortable situations this isn’t the kind of discomfort the doctors usually have to face.

He sees Matthew and Randall talking and assumes that Matthew will find a way to ask about the boot and what if anything Fred talked about on their walk back to the cabin. As he looks round Hannibal joins him.

“Something is troubling you. Is it about the storm?”

Will shakes his head and has to stop himself from linking an arm through Hannibal’s.

“No. That’s run of the mill. A pain for everyone, and I can see a degree of fatigue setting in. But no, not that. It’s possible Fred’s boots were tampered with. It might be what caused him

to fall. I don't know who, or why, but if that's what happened then there's something going on."

"Fred? What happened to the boot? Did he take it back with him?"

"No. And that's why I'm bothered. He left it, Matthew found it, but he says it's gone. He stowed it in his shelter last night, but today? Not there."

"It could have got displaced? Don't you think?"

Will sighs a small disconsolate noise and Hannibal is disconcerted by the thread of anguish it causes him.

"Will?"

"I'm telling myself that. Truly. I am. But, and I can't put my finger on it quite, but there's something. Something not quite right. And I can't tell if it's the group, or in the woods, or between them. But something is off kilter. I don't like it. And usually I'd know, so I guess that's bothering me too. I always know. Since I was a kid. Used to make me the weirdo at school. I could always tell if there was something wrong; school trip outdoors; camping; walking; even with the class pets. I could always sense if something was wrong."

"But not this time? Not now? Is it because of .."

Will interrupts him.

"I don't know what to think. I just know something is wrong, but not what."

They walk on a little further and Will halts them at the base of a turn upwards in the path. He smiles briefly at Hannibal and turns to the group.

"All right. This is the steep bit. I'd suggest re-settling your pack slightly higher on your hips and loosening your chest strap just a little. Wiggle it around to make sure you're comfortable. Ok. Everyone got their walking poles?" He looks round the still tired men, perhaps he smiles a little, so much for that famed Alpha stamina. "Great. So, no prizes for a fast ascent, take it steady, the last fifteen minutes are the worst. I promise the payoff is worth it. And with the sky this clear we should get a great view. Campsite's another forty minutes to an hour after. There's a permanent bivvi there and a food cache. And when I went up there a couple of weeks ago I restocked the woodpile so it won't be too hard tonight when we get there. I know you're tired. We'll have a very late lunch or early dinner, maybe a snack before bed if you're hungry. Everyone remember their jobs? Abel you Ok on your own with the tent? I can help or one of the others will if they get everything done fast, ok? Ready? Let's hit it."

As Will had promised the trail goes sharply up a steep ascent. Conversation in the group dies away as everyone concentrates on their footing and saving their breath to manage the new exertion of the climb. It's not a dangerous path, but it is taxing, and soon all that can be heard is their laboured exhalations. Wen runs on ahead and then circles back to chivvy at them. Even Will is tired by it, but then he's carrying Fred's extra food and is probably still sleep

deprived from the last few nights. He tries to shake himself mentally as he heads for the last push up to the top. This shouldn't be as tough as it is.

By the time he arrives he might be panting a little. He puts his walking poles on the ground and then takes off his pack and lays it down beside them. He rests his hands on his thighs for a minute as he catches his breath, still slightly winded. He looks back at the rest of the group and smiles at Matthew and Randall as they haul each other up the last few paces.

He stands up properly then and indicates the view and the two other men look out over the valley below. It is spectacular. Matthew whistles softly under his breath.

"This has got to be amazing in the fall. It's incredible now, but then? The colours? I'm definitely coming back to see it."

"Yeah. You're right it is. But this time of year. With the green? Pretty special too don't you think."

Matthew's about to say something else when he sees the look on Will's face shift, and he turns to see what he's looking at. Abel and Hannibal, Hannibal giving Abel a pull up the last tough section, both of them laughing breathlessly. And then Hannibal lifting his face and seeing Will and an expression of delight and pleasure suffusing it. He gets Abel settled at the top and drops his own gear and Matthew tries not to watch too closely as Hannibal stands next to Will and then rests a hand on the back of his neck. Not especially possessive or demarking his territory just an affectionate gesture between two mates. And yeah, that hurts, just a little. Damn.

Will draws Hannibal just a few steps away from the group and then leans a little more against him. They stand there, just looking at the incredible scenery below, and Will shivers when Hannibal speaks quietly.

"This will be the view our children will see as they grow up, the first difficult walk they will go on, their first overnight camp. They will see it in all its glowing magnificence."

Will doesn't really care that anyone might see when he takes Hannibal's hand and holds it tightly.

.....

At the campsite the group settles straight into the usual arrival routine. How fast people can adapt to new conditions and practices, if they can see the point of them at least. If they can trust the hard won lessons learned by others. Randall and Hannibal set to getting a fire going as Matthew and Will set up their respective tents. Jack grumbles about cat holes and Abel pushes him off towards the water source indicated by Will mumbling some litany about markers to himself as if to make sure he actually looks for them this time. Tobias gets on with his and Jack's tent and then sets to sorting out the cookware. By the time Matthew and Will have finished their tents the fire and cook stuff is ready. Will pulls his recipe card set from a pocket on his pack.

“Ok. Matty. Let’s do something heavy. Save us on the walk tomorrow. Pasta? There’s cheese in the cache here, so maybe a good mac and cheese? We’ve got some spices to give it a kick. Onions? There might be some here too. I usually do rice and some kind of madras curry on this site. Let’s check.”

Matthew looks round.

“You said before, that there’s a bivvi here. I can’t see it.”

Will laughs.

“Excellent. Glad my camouflage is working. Folks?” He raises his voice then to get everyone’s attention. “Ok, there’s a food cache here and a bivvi. I’ll give you about ten minutes to find them. They’re both in the clearing. Ok? Record is six minutes. But that was a bunch of Girl Scouts who were the most competitive group I’ve ever encountered. State record for company badges and everything. I’ll time you. See if you can get on the leader board.”

He sits himself down at the fire and watches as the group spend two minutes randomly checking around the clearing. He smiles a little when Abel holds up a hand.

“This isn’t working. Let’s be more systematic about it. Start one side and then we all walk forwards. You know. Fingertip search shit, you must have seen at least one show where they do that?”

The group reassembles and follows Abel’s suggestion. It takes them two minutes to walk very slowly across the clearing checking the ground for anything buried. Randall looks around in frustration.

“There’s nothing here. For sure in the clearing? Will?”

Will nods at him. And smiles as they all look around again. The smile broadens when Jack swears and points up into the branches of one of the trees just inside the rough circle.

“Fucker. It’s up there. What’s that? Bear safe?”

Will has the temerity to laugh at the collective groan.

“Yes. Bear bag actually, made of bulletproof fabric. Pretty good too and lighter than a canister. I’m still trying it out. Gotta attach it well to a tree or rock as bears will drag it and then smush it to get at it, you can get an aluminium sleeve to go inside to help with that but I only store stuff which won’t suffer too much. Ok. Good job. Six minutes. Where’s the bivvi?”

The team look round, now considering whether it too might be in the trees. It is. It’s hammocked between two pines back on the side of the circle the group had started out from. They hadn’t looked behind them. Matthew frowns.

“I could have touched it if I’d just turned round. Damn. That’s good camo though.”

“Amazing what vector printing can do nowadays. I took pictures here a few years ago and got a screen made.”

He’s about to show them in more detail when there’s a noise from the other side of the camp and they all whip round.

“Will Graham. Well there’s a thing. Garrett said you were up here. Didn’t know if we’d run into youse.”

The two men head straight across and Will walks to them laughing and holding out a hand. There are shakes all round and maybe a back slap or two. Will indicates the two men and shakes his head a little.

“Ok, these reprobates work for the Forest Service, Devon, Larry, these are my guys. I’ll let you all do the introductions. You staying tonight? We can feed you.”

The older of the two men grins.

“Works for me, we’ve got gear. Sure you’ve enough food?”

Will smiles and thinks of the prospective lightening of his pack.

“We have. You help out and we’ll feed you and tell you a few stories. Why you up here?”

Devon glances between Will and the others. He lowers his voice and Will steps closer to him.

“We’ve lost someone. Went for a fucking walk and didn’t come back. Mycologist. Doing a survey for the service. Two days ago. He was with Elliott. He’s all cut up about it, swears up and down he didn’t take his eyes off the guy, but you know how he can get?”

Will nods and then turns back to his own group.

“Two extra for supper, we’ll need more water and wood, ok folks? Toby can you help fix the guys’ tent. Matthew you Ok with the pasta? I’ll come and help with the sauce, though I’m sure Larry and Dev can’t wait to do the onions.”

.....

Through the late afternoon the group subside into anecdotes and tales of the ones that got away. For the Forest Service guys this means fish, or elk, or some bear they were supposed to tranquillise and move after it got habituated to human food and was therefore a might too interested in any camps. For the medics this turns out to be about tricky operations and procedures that could have gone south but didn’t. The atmosphere eases and Will relaxes somewhat.

When they’re washing up Larry says quietly to Will.

“Your eyes have come in? Wouldn’t have pegged you for Omega. I ain’t got no issue with it.”

Will smiles a little at him.

“Fair enough. But Larry, so you know, I wouldn’t have pegged you either.”

They’re both quiet for a bit, just scrubbing at some burnt on cheese, then Larry laughs.

“Well damn. Ain’t no one said nothing before. Youse thinks everyone knows?

Will smiles at him.

“Best kept secret in the service.” He pauses. “That everyone knows and keeps.”

The older man laughs and shakes his head, blows out his cheeks a little. Will hands him the last pan to rinse and dry off a bit before stacking it.

“My mate is here. I’ll introduce you properly later.”

Larry looks at him in surprise.

“One of these guys? Really? That must have happened fast. Oh.” He gets quiet. “Soulbond? Damn Will, straight for the jugular? Damn. You doing ok? Got suppressants and shit.”

Will nods.

“I have. They’re plus. I’m surprised you could see the ring colour.”

Larry looks at him more closely and then puts a hand to his arm.

“Come stand in the open a bit more.”

They get up from the washing up area and Will follows his friend and then turns his face to the sky and opens his eyes. Larry looks closely. From the side of the clearing Hannibal watches the interaction and frowns a little. Larry says quietly.

“Colour’s in. Your meds good? It’s faint, but it’s in. For sure.”

Will looks at him and then frowns. “I’m going to check. But they should be fine. Come with me. Meet Hannibal.”

“Hannibal? What kind of.. No, I won’t ask. All right then.”

They join Hannibal at the tent and have a brief conversation. Larry leans over and looks hard at Hannibal’s eyes. They too seem to have come in more.

“We must check the pills. I’ll get them.”

Ten minutes later the three men are crouched down outside the tent in a tight circle, and have counted out all the suppressants onto the inside of Will’s jacket lining, the small white pills a sharp contrast against the muddy green. At least a third have no brand mark on them.

Will sits back on his heels.

“Have they been swapped out? Is this why you’ve been so edgy? If you took quite a few that were wrong? And why I’m so..”

He doesn’t finish the thought and Hannibal counts the branded pills back into the bottle.

“There’s still enough for us each to take one every day for the rest of the trip. Though I think I should take two now. I’m not feeling especially in control at this moment. I’m sorry. I should have checked, or..”

Will looks at him and then at Larry.

“But it means someone messed with them. In this group. And someone brought them out here. Anticipated this.”

Larry whistles.

“Anyone know about youse? Before I mean.”

Slowly Will says.

“Doesn’t it depend on what they were trying to achieve? Or what they thought they knew or suspected. Larry, damn, this is bad, one of the group has an unrequited attachment to Hannibal. One of the others was interested in me, not sure if he knew I was omega or not, hard to say. At least two of the group, maybe three, knew Hannibal and I had an attachment, a bond. Fuck. We already lost one of the group. Actually..” he stops and considers. “Maybe the only one in the group who didn’t know or have anything before we came out here.” He looks at the two other men. “I don’t like this.”

Hannibal dry swallow two of the branded pills his expression grim.

“Nor do I. We must consider what to do. Will do you trust me to keep the remainder safe. I can only give you my word that it was not I who tampered with them.”

Will looks at him and his mouth opens a little.

“I didn’t even think of that.”

He blinks for a moment. He has to trust Hannibal, he has to. After all he’s got plenty to lose out here too.

“Of course I do. I’m feeling ok. A bit more tired than I’d expect. I thought it was just.. yeah well. I’m mostly ok. Better give me one too.”

He swallows a pill and closes his eyes. Hannibal and Larry look at each other. Not good. Not good at all.

.....

Chapter End Notes

I met Nephila-Clavipes this last week just while I was editing this chapter. I know she's reading here. My dear friend it was such a pleasure to meet you! I send love and good music! The prog kind, with a really great bridge section. You are awesome!

(For those who don't know she's also an amazing artist with great work to be seen on tumblr and on FannibalFest posters and cards. Just incredible.)

Chapter 19

The rest of the evening gradually unwinds. Hannibal endeavours not to let his concern saturate his interactions with the rest of the group, nevertheless he can't help but consider each of them individually. If someone present has adulterated the Plus-meds then there is something insidious happening, and Will's disturbance is well founded. Of all of them he's not sure who amongst the group has the most to gain. Perhaps he has. And yet, to his relief, Will seems willing enough to continue to trust him. He looks across the fire to where Will is talking to Abel and Tobias and watches as he gets up, crosses to their tent and comes back after just a quick look inside. Cards. He hears Tobias laugh when he takes the pack from Will and peers down at it as he turns the small box over in his hands.

"Really? What are they Top Trumps? And playing cards? Nice."

He watches as the three men split the pack between them and laugh their way through some game. It draws Jack in to a second round, and then Larry. Hannibal glances round the rest of the circle. Randall is reading something that is making him frown and take notes in the margin of the paperback. How unusual now to actually be holding a book. He's having to angle it to catch the light from the fire. Courteous of him not to be using a head torch. Matthew is involved in some conversation with the other Warden, Devin. Hannibal tries not to look too hard but it looks like some kind of flirting. Well. That will either ease matters or complicate them further.

"Hannibal? You should join in with this. It's both enchanting and terrifying! Look."

Abel hands him a playing card. It's just a normal card except, oh, it's a plant identifying card with points for severity of symptoms, ease of identification, seasonality, spread, that kind of thing. Clever. And if you play the Top Trump version of the game you are constantly reminded of how poisonous or otherwise a plant is. He looks at Will and the small smile on his face.

"Of course. Deal me in. What are we playing?"

.....

In his tent, by the light of a small electric lantern, late that night, Tobias applies a topical cream to a bite on his neck. Jack grunts at him.

"Something et you up?"

"This?" Tobias looks at the small tube. "Yeah. Just a mosquito or something. I'm not allergic. It just itches a little. Didn't even notice when it happened."

"Want me to take a look?"

Tobias squints at Jack.

“You’re worried?”

Jack shrugs a little.

“About this? No. I think you’ve got this. Just. Well. The rest of it. Don’t you think?”

Tobias twists the lid back on the tube of cream and stows it in a small ziplock baggie that has his wash kit in it. He puts it in the small packable bowl beside the entrance he and Jack have been using for small essentials ever since Matthew suggested it to him. He settles back under his quilt and rests on one elbow, resisting the desire to scratch. No point undoing all his own effort.

“Got real fast didn’t it. And yes. Something. All the fault lines exposed? Might be all it is Jack. But yes.”

He stops a moment.

“You know the Wardens have lost someone. Did you hear that? Couple of days ago. Might explain why I..”

He trails off and by the light of the lantern sees Jack lean up on an elbow to face him.

“Why you what Toby? What happened? This about the slip?”

Tobias shakes his head at him.

“No. Not that. Not exactly. When you were all down at the lake. I thought I heard something. In the brush. Damn. If it was that guy, and he’s out here somewhere. Lost?”

“Yeah. Lost. Doesn’t bear thinking about really.” He pauses. “You think they’ll find him?”

Tobias blows out a short breath.

“Devin. The younger one. He said they’ve got a team getting started, they were sent on ahead. Scout around. See if there are any traces. Hobbs, you know. Will’s friend? The tracker. Yeah. He’s out too somewhere. But Will gave the guys our route, in case of emergency. They knew we were up here. I expect they hoped we’d seen something.”

“Maybe we did then. Just didn’t know it.”

Tobias nods.

“Yeah. Maybe. Hope so. Maybe that’s what Fred saw. I really hope they do. For the guy’s sake. Mycologist right?”

“Yeah. Well at least that means he knows what not to eat.”

“Yeah. You think? Probably. You turning in?”

Jack pauses a moment before he replies.

“Yeah. I’ll get the lantern.”

Jack sits up in his bag and switches off the small light hung from the apex of their tent.

“Night. Sleep well.”

.....

Will kicks some dirt over the cat hole and straightens up properly. He stands still and listens to the night time silence. Not completely quiet of course. Some shifting of leaves, something that’s probably a rodent in the underbrush, something else up in one of the trees. Maybe the faint shape of voices in the distance. It’s almost completely dark now. And it’s never unnerved him before. Right this moment though? He sighs a little and turns up the lumens on his head torch. It casts a wider beam and he catches the reflected glow in a small pair of eyes low down near the ground that stops then starts and shies away. Mouse or squirrel. Probably.

He closes his own eyes. And lets the feel of the woods wash over him. Really he should make the time to do this properly. Connect. He opens them again. Voices, definitely closer.

Devin and Matthew stop on the edge of the small clearing when they see him.

“Will. Hey. Ok. Just..”

Devin trails off and he carefully doesn’t look at Matthew. Matthew takes a step towards Will and then seems to re-consider.

“You ok? Everything all right out here?”

Will angles his head lamp so it doesn’t shine in the eyes of the two men. Yeah, ok, he didn’t see this coming. Well. Fair enough. It’s not like he’s got a claim. Just. He gives himself a mental slap.

“Yeah. Just finishing up. Everything seems to be ok. I was checking the markers.” There is a slightly awkward pause but he muscles through it. “See you back at camp. Don’t get lost on the way back.”

They mutter some kind of good night and he shuts up fast as the two men step aside from the path to let him past. As he walks along the small trail back to the main site he hears nothing behind him until a small burst of laughter reaches him. Well why shouldn’t they? He rolls his eyes at himself. For fucks sake Matthew can do what ever the fuck he likes. And Devin? Well, that’s up to him. Not Will’s business. He’s a solid guy. Might even be good for Matthew. He shakes his head to himself and heads for his own tent, a faint glow from one of their small lanterns showing the faintest of outlines inside. Closer to the tent he can just about hear Hannibal murmuring to Wen. He kneels at the door and unzips it.

“Ok in here?”

Hannibal rubs harder at Wen’s ears and she takes the cue to lie down on her bed. Will gets undressed quickly and pulls on his sleep gear and then wriggles into the pile of quilts, and

tucks himself close in to Hannibal's side. Hannibal gets an arm round him and holds him close.

"My Will. Everything alright with you? How are you feeling now?"

"Better I think. Bit. Well. But better."

"I too. Comfortable?"

Will turns a little and Hannibal arranges him more closely so they fit together more tightly.

"Yeah. I'm good. Thanks."

He's quiet for a moment and then blurts out.

"I think I interrupted Dev and Matthew. Out near the cat holes."

Hannibal pauses.

"Yes? And this bothers you?"

Will tries to parse from this short comment, and the infinitesimal pause, whether Hannibal is at all annoyed or not.

"No. It doesn't bother me exactly. Or not for the reasons you might be imagining. It's just that.."

He stops for a moment, uncertain exactly why it might be bothering him. Hannibal runs a hand down his arm, a soft stroke.

"Has it happened before? In any of your groups?"

Will shifts so he is tighter in to Hannibal's side.

"It's not a rule I have. It's just not been an issue. I'm a bit surprised at Dev. And maybe Matthew. I don't know. I barely know him. But Dev? He's had an on off relationship with an Alpha for years. The guy's attached, married. Not to Dev though. To some other Beta. But he keeps stringing Dev along. Maybe this is a good thing. I don't know."

Hannibal runs the same hand along Will's arm again.

"Disconcerting."

"Just a bit out of character. And I can't tell which of them is taking advantage."

"Perhaps they both are. Some uncomplicated sex. What was it Jack said to you, fucking up against some tree? Maybe they are well met and well matched."

Will lifts his head and looks at Hannibal. The tiny lantern they have hanging in the tent makes it almost impossible to make out the detail of his face.

“Maybe. I guess. Yeah. I’m just projecting. It’s not my thing. Well. The sex bit is fine. I just like a connection.”

Hannibal smiles slightly.

“Maybe they have one. Or have something?”

“Yeah. I know. I’m just disgruntled.”

Hannibal smiles a little more.

“Ahh. Have you lost your devoted knight in shining armour?”

Will frowns at him and then his face clears a little.

“You absolute shit. Damn. That’s not what I meant.” He stops, and Hannibal is pleased to see the corner of his mouth twitch a little. “Alright. Maybe a little bit of that. Fuck. I’m such a jerk.”

He flops back down beside Hannibal and laughs.

“Yeah. Ok. Maybe. You going to make me feel all cherished and stuff?”

Hannibal smiles in the near dark and reaches up to turn off the lantern.

“I might manage.”

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In the night Tobias shifts and turns a few times, scratches at his neck, feels somewhat feverish, applies more cream and doesn’t sleep quite as well as he’d like.

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Over breakfast the group slowly reassemble and then disperse for the morning routine, Matthew passes things to Will without comment all through food prep. Will says nothing in return and it takes a good twenty minutes and the doling out of porridge for Matthew to break.

“You fucker. You’re killing me here.”

Will looks at him and laughs.

“Got you good didn’t I? Alright though?”

Matthew glances across the clearing to the pair of tents that Larry and Devin are packing away. He makes a face.

“Got his number. You know the backstory? So I got that number too. We’ll see.”

Will nods.

“Good enough for me. And honestly? Good job. I hope. Dev’s a decent guy. He’s been fucked around a fair bit. But you heard the basics. So. No judgement from me.”

“Well I guess thank you for not harshing the buzz. Anyway. We didn’t exactly..”

He stops mid sentence and runs a hand up the back of his neck, and then holds the same hand out as Will hands him back an empty kettle.

“Matthew, it’s really not my business. Except as your friend. And his. Ok?”

Matthew looks at Will, a thoughtful expression on his face as he fills the kettle and then rests it back on the collapsible tripod.

“You tell Hannibal? About last night. You did didn’t you? What’d he say?”

Will smiles as he gathers the last few mugs together to make some hedgerow tea for those rejecting yet another cup of coffee.

“He was polite but in effect told me to get over myself. But he was more polite than that.”

Matthew laughs and lightly punches Will in the arm.

“Nah. We’re still good. I’d still fuck you. Smack you a bit too. Just to, well. You know. But you’d have to get in line.”

He looks across at Devin again and this time Will sees Dev look back at Matthew and smirk and then duck back to down to talk to Larry as they finish up with their packing.

Will laughs.

“Yeah. Ok then. Wanna round up people for the last drinks before we put the fire out and get going? You packed, right?”

“Yeah. I’m good. Randall was fucking around a bit. I don’t know. He’s still shaken by getting lost. I’ll tell the others about the drinks. You ok?”

Will nods and starts on pouring out the tea and then remembers the pills.

“Matt, before you go. Look. I have to ask. When you grabbed my suppressants. Was there any sign of tampering or anything?”

Matthew frowns as he stands.

“You think I did something..?”

Will shifts fast to interrupt him.

“No. No I emphatically don’t. You’ve been totally upfront with me. But someone did. We found out last night someone had switched about a third out.”

Matthew looks down at him, a look of consternation gathering on his face.

“For placebos?”

He hunkers down beside Will again and rests a hand on the log he’d previously been sitting on, just for balance.

“That’s. That’s bad Will. Ok. So. Who knew before?”

Will looks at him.

“That I was Omega? Yeah. Exactly. Who? Maybe Jack and Abel. Just possibly Tobias. Hannibal.”

Matthew slowly nods. They’re both quiet for a few moments, then he sighs.

“And his sister.”

Will stares a question at him, and Matthew fiddles with a strip of bark on the log, peeling it back.

“Didn’t you say she came out? To see you? Could she have fucked with them. I’m guessing she knew, if she drove all that way?”

Will swallows hard.

“That hadn’t occurred to me. She was there when Wen and I got back. The door was locked but the key’s hidden under a fucking flowerpot. It’s not exactly rocket science. Oh fuck. She was so pissed with me. I mean. She was polite too. But..”

“The cabin was open wasn’t it. The day we left. So people could look round. What about then?”

Will shakes his head.

“My bag was packed then. And in the shed with everyone else’s. It’d be nigh on impossible to have searched it then let alone to mess around with the meds. Oh god. Hannibal will hate this.”

Matthew looks at him.

“That Mischa fucked with them, or that you found out?”

Will shakes his head again.

“I still think someone could have brought them out here, and messed with them this week. You’d only have to suspect there was something going on to know that fucking around with them could cause all kinds of issues and stress.”

He rubs his hands over his face.

“I’ll ask Hannibal about Mischa. Oh that’s just peachy isn’t it? He’s going to just adore that.”

Matthew sighs.

“I’ll round everyone up for drinks. And yeah. He’s going to just love that.”

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Tobias joins the others beside the dying fire and takes the mug he’s handed and peers down into the greenery swimming in it. He turns to Abel.

“What’s this? What did Will call it, hedgerow tea? If I must. I’ve had too much caffeine already. All right then?”

“I think so. I’m on coffee. Jack said you got bitten, you ok.”

He stretches out his neck a little and bares the side which was bitten, a red patch delineating how far the toxin has spread under his skin.

“Itches. And I feel a bit off. Might be running a low temperature. Apart from that I’m good to go. What are we waiting for?”

Abel shrugs.

“Just the two wardens, I think they want to fill us in on what to look out for. For this guy they’ve lost. You know? Have us cover some extra territory?”

Tobias makes a face and looks into his mug.

“Makes sense I guess.”

He winces slightly and makes a pained expression before he drains the rest of his drink, managing to avoid the splutter of plant material at the bottom which he tips out onto the ground.

“Not as good as the last lot.”

Abel makes a grimace of at face at him and they listen to Dev and Larry take them through the kind of things that their lost mycologist might leave behind. From the sound of it he has at least got his own pack which is better than nothing. But not a map or compass. Which isn’t.

As they finish up they both shake Will by the hand and Dev shoulder checks him and murmurs something. Will smiles and claps him on the upper arm. The rest of the group gather round to say their own version of farewell and a few minutes later the two wardens have shouldered their packs and left, with promises to get word to them if they find their guy. Will turns to the group.

“Ok. Twenty minutes. Then we’re off too. We’re heading for Rust Peak. That’s the highest point on our journey, and you’ll maybe be glad to hear it’s also our mid-point. I know, right. It’s Saturday. There’s another cache there, it’s up on a grassy bald so the camping is soft underfoot. Old farmstead too. Good views. Randall and Matthew have done lunch bags for

today, so make sure you grab one, as I'm sure neither of them want to carry them. And if you haven't filled your water bottle you should empty the kettles first before using the seep. Ok. Off in twenty."

At his own tent he takes his walking poles from Hannibal and turns and surveys the rest of the group in the last stages of departure preparations. He looks at Hannibal, knowing that at some point during the day he will have to ask about Mischa. But not now. Not yet.

"Good to go?"

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Forty minutes or so later the group has got into their stride and are making good progress, spread out in a line of singles and pairs along the narrow path. The trees grow tall on either side and the light is crowded out by bristling green. If you keep your eyes on the ground it feels like any other pathway, but as soon as you look up there's an odd sense of inverted vertigo, like looking deep into a canyon.

Randall shudders as he looks around him. Fear is the price of imagination after all he thinks. And really he doesn't even need to imagine that much. Not now. He glances back at Matthew, close behind him, a renewed spring in his step. Just in front Hannibal is talking with Tobias. And further ahead Jack and Abel, and Will. Their little band. And somewhere, somewhere out here, maybe, is this other guy. It could easily have been him he thinks. Easily. Well, he won't make that mistake twice.

Up near the front of the group Will stops for a moment when Wen whines at something just off the path. When he looks he sees fresh wolf scat. Enough to mean more than a loner. Maybe driven close to the pathways and human traffic by the storm. Maybe got turned around from their intended route heading for shelter or some kind of prey. He sighs. It means he ought to put Wen on a lead. Still, perhaps the others will take turns at walking with her if he explains. Jack almost certainly will enjoy it, and Wen likes Jack right back. He turns to the group, all slowly catching up, and once everyone is near by he indicates the scat.

"Wolves. And recently by the looks of it. We'll probably find some remains too." If any of them think about the guy lost out here no one says anything. "Shouldn't be a problem for us, we're too big and too ugly for them to bother with. But if you see or hear something please say. We'll put Wen on a leash for the rest of the day. She won't like it but she is used to it. Any of you willing to take her?"

As he expects Jack instantly offers. Will smiles at him. Good to know he called that right at least.

"Thanks. And make sure you don't go off alone, not for the next few hours, maybe not until we get to the camp site. I'll do an assessment along the way, keep an eye out. Everyone all right?"

There are general murmurs of assent and Will digs into Wen's pack for her leash before clipping it to her collar and handing it over to Jack. He's good though, he kneels and makes a fuss of her and Wen leans into him accepting both the leash and his hand without demur.

They head out again and Will watches as Jack and Abel lead off. They can't go too wrong on this path so he hangs back to let a few of the group go past him. He falls in beside Tobias frowning under his pack, a line of sweat beading at his hairline.

"I'm ok. Before you ask. Really. Just a bit of a temperature. Nothing bad."

"I heard Jack say you got bitten, did you check for ticks?"

He hears rather than sees Tobias shrug.

"I think it was a mosquito. By the fire. I didn't notice at the time. Wouldn't act so fast anyway." He huffs a small laugh. "Franklyn would say I'm a terrible hypochondriac. He'd be right too."

He sounds a little rueful as he says it, but it's underlined with fondness and amusement as well. Couple goals, Will thinks to himself. This is how it can be, how it will be, if they can get past this fuck-up with the meds. If it was Mischa. He smiles at Tobias.

"Ok. But say if you feel worse. Please? No shame. And Rust Peak isn't the worst place to be a bit unwell, there's a good shelter there. And I can make a call on the sat phone. Ok? Don't tough it out Toby if you feel really unwell. Ok?"

Tobias nods at him and then looks determinedly ahead of them up the path to where the rest of the group is slowly pulling away from them as they slow.

"All right. I'll tell you. But I'm sure it will pass. And thanks Will. I appreciate it." He tilts his chin up to indicate his colleagues. "Come on, we should catch up."

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At the lunch spot Will pulls one of the lightweight tarps from a pocket on his rucksack, sets it on the ground and everyone balances their packs on it, standing up, leaning against each other, in two groups. Easy to pick up and get going. And arranged like this they will shed rain effectively if there is a sudden shower. They do the same with the walking poles, a teepee of carbon, and Will smiles to see how some people have added things to their own set to mark them out. A flash of fluorescent tape. A long feather tied to the base of a moulded handle. A bit of cord boondoggled into a snake. It's instinctive he thinks, to delineate your territory in this way. Primeval.

Over lunch the group is quiet enough that birdsong reasserts itself in the surrounding wood. Something from the blackbird family, another small voice, maybe a phoebe, a thrush of some kind, something melodic. They haven't heard the loons since the lake but these small twitterings are homely, small noises and a kind of aural wallpaper that is reassuring in its almost domestic normality. The light is dappled by the broadleaves and the soft sough of a breeze shifts the daylight in more benign ways than under the coniferous stretches of woods.

As they eat Jack sets three of the stoves going and tops up three of the smaller personal kettles. Between them there will be enough for a drink each. His expression is a little set, but he can be hard to read sometimes. Hannibal watches him for a moment and then finishes up

his meal and folds the ziplock bag into a square and stuffs it into a pocket of his puffy to be washed later. Just before they'd all settled he'd watched as Jack and Will had stood off to one side having a frowning conversation over some issue. Will, he can see is still bothered. Tobias is looking unwell, so that may be the reason for his discomfort. Wen has been shifting uneasily ever since they stopped, so that might be another cause. He's about to get up from his log seat when Will stands up, brushing grains from his lap, and smiles briefly at the group.

"Small push to the top with a bit of a steep bit near the end. Nothing you haven't done already, so don't get too anticipatory. Once we're there we'll have Jack and Randall on food, Hannibal and Matthew on water, Tobias and I on wood and fire, and Abel on tidying and keeping an eye out for signs of Dr Stammetts. We've got a couple of paths that cross our route up here so it'd be good if we checked up each one for a short distance. We'll split into two groups for that. Walk twenty minutes and then come back. Nothing fancy. Straight turn around. Randall and Wen will be in one group. I'd trust the pair of them to get back to us. I'll be in the other. The rest of you can divide as you like."

He looks around the group and nods to himself.

"Tobias isn't especially well. You all know that." They all glance to where Toby is sat on a small boulder, probably an erratic, up here for a good few thousand years. He nods at them and makes a grim face. "If he's not improved by the time we get to the camp we'll discuss whether we need to get the guys out for him. I know it's not what you want Toby. But this is the best chance we've got to get help for you if you're not improved. Anyone?"

Jack holds up his hand,

"We have to Toby. Franklyn would be lived, hell, Bella would kill me if we didn't. Ok? I'm sorry. You can call it an executive decision if it makes you more reconciled to it. We want you here. But not so ill it's making you miserable. It's not worth it."

He looks round the group.

"Yeah. I'll put my hand up to it. This isn't as easy as it looks on National Geographic. But, you know. Half way there."

He bends to switch off the stoves as one of the kettles whistles and the group rally themselves to make drinks. Hannibal pulls Will to one side once they both have a mug in hand.

"Will?"

"Yeah. Partly Tobias. And Wen. And.." he stops. This isn't really the moment, but when will the moment be?

"I asked Matthew about the pills. He says not him. And I'm inclined to believe him. But Hannibal.." he stops and looks off to one side. Hannibal watches him chew at his lip and feels a growing unease at the expression on Will's face.

"Will. I promise you, I wouldn't."

Will blinks at him, his glasses flashing off a stray bit of sunlight.

“No. No. That’s not what I mean. Look. And this is shit. And all kinds of wrong. But I have to ask. Might Mischa have done something when she came out?”

He sees the look of horror on Hannibal’s face, then watches as it melds into first annoyance and then something angrier.

“Did Matthew suggest it?”

Will looks at him and he knows he’s going stubborn when he says.

“We just talked about who had the opportunity. And maybe the intent. I told him before that she came out to the cabin. Could she? Hannibal? Before you get pissed off with Matthew, or with me for that matter. Really think about it? What wouldn’t she do for you? Could she have done it. She’s Omega. She probably uses the same meds.”

He watches as Hannibal eyes him coolly.

“I know you’re angry. But you have to think about it. And think about who else it could be? Please.”

He has a throb of something nasty across the bond and it makes him feel sick for a moment. He rubs his hands over his face and tries not to roll over on the issue when Hannibal raises a hand to his face and covers his eyes for a moment. He feels sicker still when Hannibal steps just a pace away.

“I can’t speak of this. I can hardly believe you could possibly imagine she would do such a thing. She’s my sister. But nothing would..”

He stops and turns on his heel and walks away. Will is left to his mug of cooling coffee and a sense of gut wrenching despair. But he had to ask, he had to. He watches as Hannibal goes to talk with Abel. Yeah of course. Abel. Another one of the group who knew. He looks around. It could have been Abel. Or Jack. If it wasn’t Mischa who else could it be. He stares down at his feet for a moment and then dumps the remainder of his coffee out on the ground in a half savage gesture. Push come to shove, he has to face it, it could have been Hannibal.

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Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Tissues?

A little later in the afternoon they come to the four way split in the path and Tobias admits to feeling still unwell. He looks grey and is panting with the effort of just staying upright. He drops his bag onto the ground with relief and then eases down onto the ground his lower half protected by the overtrousers he's wearing.

"I'm sorry. I just can't. I need to stop for a bit."

Matthew finds his water bottle in the net pocket on the front of his pack and Tobias drinks from it in small sips.

Will looks at the three paths.

"We told Dev and Larry we'd look. Randall? You lead one group, and I'll take the other, and someone should stay here with Tobias. Just fifteen to twenty minutes tops, then turn round and come straight back. Look for recent litter, wrappers, tins, or discarded clothing. If he's got hypothermia he'd have shed things. I'm sorry. Is that ok?"

In the end, they talk it through and Randall goes with Matthew and Jack, Hannibal stays with Tobias, and Abel comes with Will.

They're quiet for the first stretch. It isn't entirely uncomfortable, after all they have managed to date to always get along pretty well. Abel stumbles a little and makes a sharp kind of noise and Will can't help but wonder if it was manufactured to give them an excuse to speak, but he says nothing, just readjusts his pack on his back and lets out a small breathy laugh and carries on.

After another ten minutes Abel, just a little ahead on the narrow path stops suddenly.

"That's not good. Oh shit. Will? What is that?"

Whatever had been hanging in the air between them dissipates fast as Will comes up to Abel's shoulder and sees what he's looking at.

"Oh. No. You're right. That's not right at all."

The two men hunch down by the deer carcass on the compacted soil. It's more than a few days old, but what's odd isn't the fact that it's mostly been left intact, but that it has been decorated with flowers and leaves.

Abel looks at Will.

“Could it be the fungus guy? Do you think he might be leaving some kind of message or, I don’t know, some kind of... I don’t know?”

Will slowly shakes his head.

“I don't know either. I really don’t know at all.”

He looks at Abel properly and sees the fear at the corner of his eyes and in the creases of his downturned mouth.

“Abel. This is... this is awful. Hannibal told you didn’t he? And I just don’t know if this is part of some bigger weird thing going on around us.”

Abel stutters out a worried breath.

“He said you thought it might be Mischa. About the pills? I said I could see why you thought that. He wasn’t that delighted with me either. But I think he understands a little more. Who else could it be? Him? That’s not a great thought either is it?”

Will nods at him,

“It’s what I’ve been thinking. All afternoon. What if it wasn’t Mischa, what if it was him? What do I know after all? I met him two weeks ago. I know next to nothing about him really. He barely knows me either. Fuck. I’m sorry.” He looks back down at the deer. A small doe. “This is appalling.”

They both stand up and still look with dismay at the carcass on the ground before them.

“Did it die naturally?”

Will leans in closer and carefully toes the head of the small deer back with his boot.

“See that? That’s something like a wolf, the tear in her throat. But it’s not a wolf. For a start they wouldn’t have left the body. And it’s the only marking, with a wolf attack there’d be more to see, the body would be mauled around some more, where the deer tried to get away. It’s more like something that knew wolves went for the throat and mimicked it.”

Abel puts a hand out and clasps Will’s shoulder.

“For what it’s worth, and you appreciate I don’t know Hannibal that well either, but I don’t think this is on him.” He lets out a short desperate noise of hysterical laughter. “He wouldn’t do that. He’s too honourable for that. You came out here thinking he was married, he came out here thinking that for some reason you were rejecting him. He wouldn’t force it. He’s a bit of an over confident shit about some things, but not this. You’ve demolished him.” He looks down at the deer and shudders and then back at Will. “None of this. He wouldn’t do anything that might hurt you.”

Will sighs and nods and takes his glasses off and puts them in his pocket.

“I made some joke about him having to court me properly when we got back. Fuck. We’ve done it all the wrong way round.”

“Yeah. No use me saying it’s why there used to be rules about this kind of thing is there? ‘Bond in haste, repent at leisure, Court each other, bond with pleasure’? There’s a reason that’s an old saw. Yeah. Sorry. I know I’m not helping.”

Will huffs a small sad laugh.

“No. You’re right. It’s good actually. If there’s a rhyme? Means we’re not the first idiots to have slightly fucked themselves over. But it does occur to me that...”

Abel squeezes his shoulder and then lets go.

“Yeah. Me too. If someone knew, or guessed, they might have thought that fucking with the meds would drive one or both of you into doing something irreversible.” He glances at the buff around Will’s neck still covering the bonding mark. “And then finding out you’d been manipulated into it? Either of you...”

He doesn’t say anything more, but Will can see where the thought is going. He squeezes the bridge of his nose with his fingers. Well shit. He lets out a long sigh.

“Do you have a camera? Maybe we should take a picture of this?”

Abel shakes his head so Will pulls a notebook out from his shirt breast pocket and writes down a few things and then makes a quick drawing.

“She’s missing some organs. And I’ve written down the flowers. In case that means anything. Just. Fuck.”

They spend a few more minutes looking for any signs in the brush just off the path but find nothing more.

“We should get back. Abel what shall we say to the others?”

They walk back along the trail and as they get closer to the crossroads they can hear clear voices, slightly raised in pitch, anxious. When they arrive the group is already assembled and it is instantly apparent that Tobias is much worse. Hannibal stands and comes closer to Will and looks at him steadily.

“We must put everything else aside, he is very ill. We must phone for the rescue services. When we get to the camp.”

Will nods at him, and then, even though it’s really for Hannibal to show willing Will catches his hand and holds it tightly and sees something in Hannibal’s face ease.

“My Will. I am sorry.”

“It’s ok. And also. It’s really not. I talked to Abel. We should talk later. I think it’s even worse than we thought. But, for now? Now we have to help Toby. Yes?”

Hannibal nods, so Will squeezes his hand and lets go and then kneels down beside where Tobias is now propped up against a pile of backpacks that someone has arranged. The others stand restlessly in an uneasy circle as Will settles himself kneeling at his shoulder. Tobias just leans there with his head back and his eyes closed. When Will puts a gentle hand on his arm he opens his eyes and looks at him.

“It really hurts. Inside. Guts, kidneys, liver. The whole thing. My digestive tract feels like it’s on fire. Someone gave me something didn’t they? Fred wasn’t an accident. Fuck.”

Will leans forward and rests his forehead on Tobias’ shoulder and then lifts it and speaks close to his ear, only to him, in a whisper.

“I think they might have. I can’t tell you how sorry I am. It might be someone in the group, thinks you saw something or know something.”

“How long?”

Will sighs.

“Depends what it was. If it was a fungus there’s a chance you’ll feel better and then it will suddenly get much, much worse. Some painkillers will help.”

He stops and swallows hard, Tobias shifts his head just slightly to look at him.

“But it’s irreversible? Yes. I can see it is. God.”

They’re both quiet for a moment.

“I wrote to Franklyn. It’s in my notebook. Give it to him. Yes. If you can? And listen, Fred wrote some notes in the back of the book he was reading. The thing Matthew gave to Randall. I didn’t get a chance to read them.”

“It might have just been that he saw signs of Stammetts.”

Tobias is quiet for a bit and Will eases back onto his haunches and then reaches for Tobias’s hand.

“We’re going to move you up to Rust Peak. We’ll call the service from there. If we wait a little you might be able to walk in a bit, but we can do a stretcher if you’d rather go now.”

Tobias shrugs and sighs and then a flash of pain crosses his face.

“Wait a little. Then we can try. It’s spasms now. Will you tell the others? You should tell them. Later on. So they know what’s coming.”

It takes another half hour for Tobias to be ready to walk, he’s able to joke a little, but not surprisingly it is a somber group that pulls on their packs. As they get ready to leave Abel holds up a hand.

“I realise we haven’t talked about what we found down the paths. I’m guessing no one saw anything helpful? Ok. Well. Will and I found a deer carcass. Someone has mucked around with it. Creepy. It might be our guy. So keep an extra look out. Ok? We can talk about it later. Will?”

“Yeah. Ok. We ready? Let’s do it.”

Matthew shoulders Tobias’ pack and Jack gets an arm round him to help him stay upright. To begin with they stagger a little, but slowly he manages to disengage from Jack’s arm and uses his walking poles to keep him balanced and upright. He smiles tightly at Will. They both know this is only a respite.

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Half an hour later, as they walk along a slightly sharper incline they can see the flow of water below them swollen by spring melt from higher up. The rush of the stream is loud in the otherwise breathy silence. All of them have thoughts crowding their minds. Concern for Tobias. Concern about the deer carcass and what it can possibly mean. The news about the adulterated pills have spread round the group so there is worry too about the meds and who might be responsible. And if there are a few sideways glances perhaps no one is surprised, and perhaps too no one tries too hard to meet each other’s eyes.

Fault lines, Tobias had called them. This walk, into the woods, is exposing their fault lines. The shifting plates of experience and emotion. Changing things between them, and whilst there are fractures it is also at the edges of things that change happens. It’s just that out here the context is unfixed and provides no certainties.

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It’s not impossible that several of them think that both the weather and the woods are beautiful in the sunshine.

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When they arrive at the grassy bald the group falls quickly into the usual routines, all of them anxious to get the site set up.

Jack and Matthew and Randall get two tents erected and together they get Tobias comfortable in one of them, using one of the folding chairs to get his head a little higher than his abdomen. Somehow it eases things he says if he’s not lying prone. Jack fusses round him a bit, both of them feeling their way round the dues of grief.

“Tell Bella... well, you know.”

Jack swears quietly under his breath.

“Fuck’s sake Tobe. You tell her.”

Neither of them say anything more so Jack shifts out of the way so Wen can lie beside Tobias, stretched out on Fred’s down blanket left behind in his hasty packing, resting her

head on her paws. Tobias manages to flit a hand round her head and she rumbles pleasantly, a low sound, deep in her chest.

Out in the circle of tents the group gather round Will.

“Jack, you’ll share with Abel tonight? We should take turns with Toby. The fact that he has..” he stops. And then starts again. “The fact that’s he’s recovered a bit isn’t a good sign. He said I should tell you. There is a chance.” He stops again. “There is a chance, quite a likely one, I’m sorry. Well, that this will kill him.”

The group is silent. Jack rubs a hand over his face and then bends at the waist and rests his hands on his thighs. He stands then and walks away from the group to the edge of the clearing near the broken down ruined farmstead and the low chimney stack where Will’s tarp is still tied from his previous visit. He stands there, facing away from them and they see his shoulders heave.

“What is it? It’s not the bite is it? Is it? It doesn’t seem like it could be?”

Will shakes his head.

“He doesn’t know when, or who, but we think someone gave him something. From the way his symptoms have changed and waxed and waned over the day I think it’s likely it was a mushroom.”

They’re all quiet. Absorbing the information.

“I know. We have to believe it wasn’t intentional. Accidents like this do happen.”

“Have they happened? To you? Before?”

Will looks at Randall.

“No. I’ve never had anything like this. First Fred? And now this? And Toby nearly falling on that edge? Nothing like this. And the meds I take? Someone messed with them. And unless we have a particularly nasty stalker...”

He trails off and the men can’t help but shift and look out beyond the clearing and into the forest. Even now, in broad daylight, the darkness that begins almost as soon as you look deeper, beyond the edges of the trees is unnerving. The woods are quiet again because of the noise they have been making. The silence seems ominous.

Matthew takes a breath.

“It could be a sequence of unconnected events, which taken together look bad. Any one thing? Well it doesn’t have to tie into another, we don’t have to make it fit. It’s just that together it’s bad. Yes? I know it looks bad. But it might be a coincidence.”

Randall makes an attenuated laugh.

“What? A pretty steep coincidence. But I don’t get it. Who’s it aimed at? Toby? I don’t see it? Fred? What? Because he thought he saw something? But why? Do we even know what he saw? Or who?”

“He didn’t say anything to you?”

Randall shrugs at his friend.

“When we walked back? He said he thought someone had messed around with the path markers to the catholes. He’d scared himself shitless because he almost got lost on the way back. Couldn’t decided if it was something that had actually happened or if he imagined it because he freaked out about it.”

He shrugs again.

“Yeah. Sorry. I should have thought. I don’t remember who collected them the next day?”

They look at each other. No one can really remember. Any one of them might have collected them, even if they hadn’t been on the rota. Will quietly swears to himself. He usually keeps a note of who is doing what each day. But not this time, distracted as he has been.

“Ok. Look. We can’t do anything about this right now. But be careful. If it’s not someone out there, well, maybe someone did something stupid, with Toby I mean. And can’t say. I mean. If that’s what happened, I’d understand. It’s awful. But I get it.”

He looks over his shoulder to where Jack is now turned round facing them again, grief still writ large on his face. He looks older. All the light washing the colour from his face. The sorrow casting new shadows.

“Jack?” He waits a moment for Jack to rejoin them. “Ok. Rota for tonight. So, we’ll take turns with Toby, keep him comfortable, talk to him, keep his fluids up. An hour on and then everyone will get to have some sleep for at least five hours in a block. Ok? Abel you first? Then we go alphabetically, Hannibal, Jack, Matthew, Randall, Me. Through the rest of the day and night. Other chores? Jack, there’s enough firewood here for tonight and tomorrow. Look after the fire will you? Matthew and Abel will you do food? I’ll get the bear canister down after I’ve tried the satellite phone.” He looks up at the small peak a little distance above them. “It’s fifteen minutes up there and back again. Hannibal and Randall will you manage water? And the catholes and markers. Please can you check the markers?”

The group shift and he can see them pull themselves together.

“Ok. I’ll get the phone and see if I can get hold of the guys at the service. Everyone else? Ok?”

.....

In their tent they sit opposite one another as Will extracts the plastic case for the satellite phone from his backpack and looks at Hannibal.

“Be careful. Whatever else you do. Be careful.”

Hannibal nods and unpacks his bedding and lays it out on the groundsheet next to Will's.

"I have been thinking several things this afternoon."

Will stops what he's doing and looks at him, his eyebrows raised a little.

"I have been thinking about who might benefit if you and I were to no longer trust one another. Or what might happen if we had both been intractable."

"Yeah. I had that thought too. Follow the money? Yeah. For sure."

Hannibal nods briefly, and reaches across the small space and cups Will's cheek in his hand.

"You must be careful as well."

"I told Abel that we don't really know each other. Well. We do. And we don't. He talked some good sense at me. I'm sorry. About before. Really."

Hannibal leans over and kisses him gently.

"I have thought about what you said about Mischa. And I have had to face the unpleasant truth that she was angry and afraid. And people do things we think quite out of character when their love is turned on its head. But Tobias? And Fred? Did only Matthew know she came to visit you?"

"Matthew? No. Randall too. Maybe Abel. Did we tell him? And she might have told any of the others. I think Jack knew. Oh. I know about what Randall said about Fred. Is that what he said to you? Didn't you say he mentioned something. Fuck. Fuck."

"Will?"

"I just remembered. Tobias said Fred made some notes in the back of some book he was reading. Matthew's maybe. No. Randall's. I think. He didn't get to read them."

"Randall was reading a book last night. He was making notes."

They sit back and look at one another.

"We should try and get hold of the book." He huffs a small sad sound. "I have to go and try with the phone."

Hannibal nods tightly.

"Though you think he might die."

"Yeah. Even so. They won't want to leave him here. If he does die. Fuck. If he does die we have to bury him and cover him over with rocks. Because of the wolves. And the bears. Just temporarily, until they can get a crew up here. Oh god. He's going to die Hannibal. He is going to die. It's unbearable really. He's a sweet guy. His partner. Franklyn? God."

Hannibal folds him into an embrace and they sit there for a moment until Will pulls off.

“I’ll go phone. You’re next with Tobias. Yeah? Half an hour’s time. Ok. And yes. I will be very careful.”

He sees the look on Hannibal’s face.

“Look come with me. It should only take half an hour, maybe forty minutes. I’ll get the bear canister down before we go, it’ll give Matthew and Abel a chance to get started on dinner prep. It’s better if we all try and keep going. Yes?”

They extract themselves from the tent Will thinking furiously about what Tobias said, and what Randall said about Fred. There’s something there he doesn’t quite understand. Outside, across from them, Jack is crouched by the fire and Matthew turns and looks at them both.

“Toby is a bit worse. Can we give him a hot drink? Will it make it more uncomfortable for him?”

Will thinks of what is coming if it’s what he thinks it is.

“Should be fine. Tea probably. Ask him if he’s got a preference. Ok?”

Matthew turns back and he and Jack make a start on the fire and the kettles. Jack murmurs to Matthew and heads towards the tent. Will watches him crouch down at the door and then straighten and come back towards them. He looks grey with fatigue. Will feels a great pulse of sorrow for the man. This wonderful idea, two incredible weeks. And now?

“Matt? I’m just getting the food out of the bear canister. Do you want to come as well? Carry it back. I’m heading up to the peak to try the satellite phone straight after?”

Matthew manages a faint smile.

“Yeah. Course.”

He pushes the kettle more securely into the flames and then stands. Jack takes his place at the edge of the pit and then busies himself with some mugs as the three men walk across the wide clearing.

“There’s a few of these old farmsteads up around in the woods, old cabins. Did I tell you about the one I met the bear in? Garrett’s old place? No. I shall. On a better day.” They stand and look at the chimney. “I still can’t decide how they got the rocks up here. Maybe carried them one at a time. Or did it some spring picnic. Like the Amish raise barns. Collectively.” He feels the edge of the tarp. “I’m slightly surprised this survived the storm the other night.”

They walk round to the straight pine that Will has hoisted the bear canister up in and he begins to undo the rope.

Later on, when Matthew check the knots and the rope, and they all talk it over, they will be appalled that they didn’t see what was coming. And relieved that a chance observation meant it didn’t all end right there.

“Is this wolf scat?”

Hannibal ducks down and Will twists his head, just a little, to see. And it is this that saves him.

The canister on its long, long rope, swings through the air like a terrible pendulum, catching Will hard on the side of his head. The rope rushes through his hand and the canister rolls away when it hits the ground with a dull thud. Will sprawls sideways and it’s only by luck more than any design that he doesn’t hit his head on the corner of some of the stone work of a fallen bit of wall.

Matthew and Hannibal stand there for a moment, stunned. They both drop to their knees on either side of Will.

“He’s breathing. Don’t move him.”

“I wouldn’t. I beg your pardon.” Hannibal takes a sharp breath. “Get Abel. He’s good with neck injuries. Randall as well. Please?”

Matthew blinks at him.

“Yes. Sure. Fuck. What the hell happened? Quick. Here, take my coat. He’ll get cold.”

They carefully drape the down jacket over Will’s torso, nothing to be done yet about the cold ground he is lying on.

“Matthew? Hurry.”

Matthew looks at Will’s prone body. And then scrambles away shouting for his colleagues’ help.

Hannibal doesn’t touch Will. He can still feel the steady pulse of the bond. It will have to be enough he thinks despairingly. It will have to be enough, for now at least.

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Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

CW. Some mentions of animal and human deaths. No descriptions.

He can hear music he thinks. Some kind of steel stringed guitar maybe. And a sweet voice over it. He follows the voice and the laughter bubbling just under the words. It hisses into static and then there's the murmur of an announcement fading away. He opens his eyes and sees an endless stretch of water. The radio comes in strong again something more upbeat and he hears a hand slapped against a thigh. "This is a good 'un Willy. You like this? I like this. You come help your old man now." He closes his eyes when the horizon tilts. He never once got seasick and some part of his brain scrambles to wonder why now.

There's a tender hand round his head and he wishes he could see his dad more clearly. He thinks of all the times he'd sit of an evening and his dad would ruffle his hair, outside some mobile home, or cabin, or even a tent one long summer when all his dad could get was picking. It was ok though. His mom is hazier still, but he knows it makes a kind of sense she's there with them. Even places she'd never been. The music changes and he laughs when they pick him up and swing him round against the backdrop of some new piece on the old transistor his dad got given in a swop for some tinkering.

He laughs, even though the dancing makes him feel a lurching kind of sick. It's not some memory he thinks. But that doesn't matter in this long laziness of a stretched out dream. There're details at the edges that are only half sketched in, only partly drawn, like a Polaroid you took and the chemicals are still turning. Curing. Is that what they do? Like cheese. Or soap. Soap he thinks. He can smell soap.

It's a good smell. It's the one he uses. He grew up with it and somehow there's no point in changing something that works. Sharp though. Coal tar. His mom had liked that translucent one, the one you could melt in a bowl over boiling water and make into shapes. She did it sometimes at Christmas. Make little cubes or hearts in ice cube trays or lolly moulds and fix them up in a little net bag for folks done up with a scrap of ribbon or fabric. He used to sit by a little roadside stall and sell them to passers by. Only a dollar he'd say, just a little dollar. And sometimes someone would buy one or two.

One time some lady stopped and bought the whole tray. Twenty five dollars in one go. When he brought the money home his mom had cried and his dad had gotten all tight round the eyes and Will knew it was good and somehow not good too and he couldn't tell why. But he'd been hugged a lot and that was fine. And he'd had a new sweater at Christmas.

He still had it somewhere. Not the whole thing of course. But someone, some time had turned it into the outside of a pillow cover. Green and blue stripes. In his bedroom. In the cabin.

Yeah the cabin. Where he's always safe.

The music stops but he can still hear birdsong, waxwings chittering, and the murmur of voices. And smell the soap. And a kind hand round his hair. But his dad is dead. He knows that now. He tries his eyes again, yeah. That's ok.

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Matthew extends a hand and helps Jack up the last few rocks. At the top they both breathe a little harder.

"Hell of a thing."

Matthew nods at him still a little winded.

"We should look at the rope when we get back. It can't have been an accident."

Jack nods briefly.

"I know. Don't think I don't know. All of this..." he gestures helplessly around, the scrambled path they just came up, the woods below them now they're just above the tree line, the sharp drop off a few feet away. "I just don't understand." He closes his eyes against the beauty of the day for a moment. "Ok. You know how to work the phone?"

Matthew sets his daysack down and pulls out the rugged plastic case inside about the size of two copies of the Gideon Bible or the Book of Mormon you might find in any motel bedside drawer. He flicks open the click locks and then flattens his bag on the ground and rests the case on top of it.

"There're instructions. I think it's straightforwards. Will was going to come up here because the signal catches faster. He made some joke about not being snagged on the branches."

He sees the look on Jack's face.

"Yeah. I don't know either. But he said it's a phone and a beacon. Ok."

He bends his head to read the instructions and then pulls the phone out of the case.

"Ok, we push the green button to get a signal. Will says it can take a minute or two before something is in range. Yeah. I know. I didn't ask about that either. The lights down here flash red when there's nothing, then amber, then green when you've got something. He said there's a stored number. Yeah ok. I see."

He straightens up and stands beside Jack as he switches the phone on. For a moment or two the screen lights up and they can see a number across its face. Then it darkens and there's nothing.

"Odd. Ok. Let's try that again."

He switches the phone off and then on again. This time the screen doesn't come on. Jack takes it from him and tries it but with the same result, he turns the phone over.

The back of the phone has two plates both held in place by four tiny screws at the corners with cross heads. Jack looks at Matthew.

"You got a screwdriver?" He asks tightly.

Matthew slowly shakes his head.

"Not for a cross head. I got keys and shit. But I don't know. We could fuck the threads up properly."

Jack hands him the phone.

"Good call."

He fumbles at his waist belt and from the small pouch on the side he draws out his own key ring.

"Bella gave me this before we left. 'Every day carry'. She laughed at me about it. Look."

In his hand the key ring holds a normal key for any kind of Yale type lock; an inch long metal peanut with a line round the middle; a tiny press torch; a small pry bar; a long flat metal shape that Matthew realises is a serrated knife you can open up; and another key which isn't a key at all.

The last thing, the key that isn't, has a flattened round faced skull where the flat disc of a key normally is, the two eyes, one larger than the other are good for bolts, and the top of the disk is shaped with just enough protuberance for flat head screws. There's a bottle opener. And the end of the 'key', which you'd insert into a lock, is a small cross head screw driver.

"Neat huh? I couldn't think what I'd use it for. But you know how she is." He huffs a small laugh. "The peanut unscrews, it's a goddam lighter. Good for a few goes. In an emergency. You know."

Matthew nods. He's beginning to.

He takes the key set from Jack and makes a start on the tiny screws at the corner of the larger of the two plates. He passes each one back to Jack who holds them in the flat of his hand, palm extended like an offering.

When he's got the fourth off Matthew uses the tiny pry bar to lift the plate. They both lean in to look. Inside they can see four wires and a set of terminal ends.

"Some fucker..."

"Yeah. Some fucker is right. There's no spare in the case is there?"

Jack dips down to the plastic case and checks the small netted pocket on the inside.

“Did Will say there was?”

“Yeah. I did ask that.”

“It’s not fucking there now.”

Jack straightens.

“So why’d it come on at all?”

“Residual charge? Bit of life left. I don’t know. Something like that. You must have had battery things do that? Or things you unplug while they’re still going, they just run out.”

“And stop.”

Matthew nods his head and then shakes it.

“And stop. Ok. If you give me the screws I’ll put the plate back. It guess it’s possible he’s got a back up or, I don’t know, maybe we can rig something.”

Jack passes the screws back and Matthew works on refitting the plate and setting the phone back into the case. As he does so Jack walks to the edge of the drop off mindful of his feet as he does so.

When Matthew straightens he sees Jack hunkered at the edge carefully balanced on one knee.

“Jack?”

“Matt. Come here a minute.”

There’s a query in his voice and Matthew sets his bag down again.

“What the fuck is that?”

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Hannibal takes the cup Abel gives him.

“Thank you. I think he’s on the edge now.”

As he drinks Abel kneels beside him and Will. He runs a hand gently through Will’s hair and watches his eyelids. There’s movement behind the closed eyes.

“I think so too. That’s good. I don’t want to move him much more until he comes round properly. Make an assessment then. You know the drill.”

Hannibal nods.

“I do. Thank you Abel.” He pauses and lowers his voice. “How is Tobias?”

Abel swivels a little and sits cross legged on the corner of the tarp they have under Will. Safe beside the fire now with a groundsheet and mat underneath and a sleeping quilt over him. He takes a long swig of his own cup of coffee and stretches his hand out to rub his fingers through Wen's fur. She rumbles in her sleep. Her head rested over her paws. Her body tight against Will's in a long line.

"Good girl." He murmurs. "Randall's with him. I just checked in on them, took him a drink too. Randall says he's been muttering. But overall? Barely responsive. I'd like to look at Will's first aid kit. In an ideal world I'd get Tobe on a saline drip. Just to keep his fluids up, keep him hydrated at the very least. Did Will say what kind of fungus he thought it was?"

"No, and those playing cards only say what not to eat and how severe the symptoms will be if you do, not what they actually are. But you're right about the drip. We could use one of the water bottles. If we've a line. Could you rig an IV needle?"

Abel looks at him and twitches a small smile.

"You'd never know it to look at me but I spent two years in the Peace Corp. I've done plenty of field medicine." He smiles a little more. "It's where I met Mrs G actually. Where's the kit?" He extends a hand. "Stay with Will. Just tell me. I can get it."

At Hannibal and Will's tent he finds the kit as directed and brings it back to the fireside and hunkers down beside them again.

"Ok. No tubing. But there is a needle. Ok good. Maybe one of the water filters has a line. We can do a reasonable job on sterilising it. I'll ask Randall. You got anything like that?"

"No, just a squeeze filter. But ask Jack. He said something about getting tangled up in his."

"They're not back yet."

He doesn't ask it as a question but both of them know that every interaction and discussions is tinged with a kind of uncertainty now.

"Forty minutes? An hour? It will have taken them time to get up there, get set up, wait for a signal, explain, get back." He stops and looks around the site, tilting his head a little. "I don't hear them. I don't hear anything."

He and Abel listen. Abel almost whispers.

"It's only this quiet if there's a reason everything has stopped. Will said it was the best indicator of there being something out in the brush, or coming up a path. A predator. Something everything wants not to be noticed by."

They both stop talking.

There's a little wind rustling the treetops. But no birds. No insects. Nothing moving in the scrub or brush or grass of the bald. A shingle on the half rotted and collapsed outhouse on the other side of clearing makes a wood on wood rubbing sound, but that's the wind catching at it intermittently.

Hannibal thinks he can hear his heart beat, a little accelerated, the stress of the day pumping round him.

And then there are voices.

Abel stands.

“Ok. What happened?”

“You got coffee? I need coffee. And then we need to work out what the ever loving fuck to do.”

.....

The five men, Will still lying down and still only on the edge of consciousness, are gathered round the fire when Randall joins them.

“Matty? Jack? What happened?”

Matthew starts in.

“Someone took the battery out of the phone. It’s screwed in, behind a plate. It wasn’t an accident it couldn’t have been. The spare is missing too. If Will doesn’t have a secondary back up we’ve no way of calling out. How are they both?”

He looks at Randall who shakes his head in distress.

“Really we’re just making him comfortable. As comfortable as we can. I don’t know.”

Matthew nods and looks at Hannibal.

“And Will?”

“We think coming round. A bad concussion and we’ll need to watch for signs of haemorrhage. But both Abel and I concur. He will be alright.”

Jack sighs.

“Ok. Ok. That’s good. That’s something. Matt go and check the rope on the bear safe. I want to know if it was rigged.”

Matthew drops his daysack beside them and heads across the clearing to the tall pine. Jack draws the other men’s attention back to him.

“Ok. That’s not all. We couldn’t work out how to get down there but a fair way below the summit we went up to get the signal we could see a bag and some other gear. It might have been a person. We were too far away to tell. Is there a map? Can we look? Randall?”

“Yes. Ok. I’ve got one of the sets still. I’ll get it.”

He returns to the fire as Matthew does and spreads the map out on the ground. The others lean over him to follow his finger as he traces along some lines.

“We’re here. See this area. That’s Blood Mountain. Got it? This is Rust Peak, like an extra summit. The contours are close together here on the map? Ok, that’s where it’s really steep, but there’s a way round. See. Just here.”

He points to a trail that leads away round the base of the peak.

Jack nods.

“Yeah. Ok. We could easily have not seen it. I wonder if it’s marked. Is this federal land or are we still on Will’s property?”

There’s a shrugging of shoulders. Matthew sighs.

“He was going to show me. He’s got a map marked up which shows who owns which bit. I guess it’s in your tent.”

He looks at Hannibal. Jack interrupts before Hannibal can reply.

“Can we get there?”

Randall squints at the map again.

“I can’t see why not. You want us to go?”

Jack nods.

“Someone. Maybe you and two others? In case it is a person. This guy. What’s his name? Stammetts was it? If it’s him. Maybe he’s alive?”

“And has some answers?”

“That too. Sure. Matthew? You checked the rope?”

They all look at Matthew, he looks angry, the tension in his shoulders stretching down to his clenched fists.

“Someone rigged the line. You can see from the weathering where it’s normally tied, ok, and because of the rain the inside of the knot should have been dry, but the whole rope is soaked through. Except for a different bit. I can’t tell what knot was tied but I’d guess some kind of slip. So that when anyone undid the rope instead of just easing the safe down it was rigged to swing. It wouldn’t take much. You’d need to know a little about knots but that’s not impossible either. And Will’s probably shown us all at least one or two. You know, clove hitch, tripod lashing, bowline. Shit he’s even got those cards.”

They all nod. Will has flash cards for knots as well as the wild food playing cards and recipe cards. Somewhere there’s even a set of ‘every day carry’ cards with instructions for

emergencies: shelters; fire starting; water collection and filtering; trapping; signalling; finding you way without a compass; tracking; more about knots. They've seen those too.

Jack refocusses them.

"Ok. Randall? You and Matthew and Abel see if you can reach the gear. If you do and there's no one there see if there're any signs, what did Will say before? Broken branches, discarded clothes down a trail, anything. Ok? And if you find him alive? Bring him back? Ok? We have to try and do that. Hannibal and I will stay with Tobias and Will. I'll get some more wood. Sort out some food."

Abel holds up a hand.

"I'd like to get Toby rigged with an IV. Does your filter have tubing?"

Jack nods.

"Ok. I'll go with Randall and Matthew. You deal with that. I'll find it before we go. And the food? You good for that?" He sees Abel nod. "Everyone else? Ok?"

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Jack and Matthew retrace their steps for maybe half a mile before Randall halts them.

"Ok. Here. I think here. There should be a trail, off that way."

He gestures off to one side, and the three men stare hard into the brush.

"Ok. Check the ground over there, if there ever was a path it'll have less growth, might even have some stones underfoot. Back from when the people in the homestead were making a go of it. Jack, look at waist height for flashes or circles. On the trunks facing us."

Matthew pushes forwards into the undergrowth just off the main path and uses his walking poles in one hand to part the tall plants.

"What is this? It isn't kudzu."

Neither of the other two answer, both of them doing the same thing, one a little to the left of him and one to the right.

"Here. I think here."

They look at where Randall is pointing. A lime green flash on the trunk of a silver birch. The colour standing out, weathered at the edges and in the centre but still clear.

The three of them push through the brush and Matthew points ahead.

"There's another. Twenty feet."

They reach the first silver birch and Matthew checks the back to see if there's a flash on the reverse. Jack pipes up.

"It's here. This side of the path. On the right. Isn't that what Will said. Always on the right. Like on a freeway."

There's a small thread of excitement as they wade forwards to the second tree. And check again both forwards and back. Behind them the broken leaves and small branches pushed aside show their path clearly.

"Ok. Good. We got this. But it means nothing, or at least nobody came this way, not recently at least."

They carry on. And every twenty feet or so there's a flash of green, always on a silver birch. For a moment Matthews gives a thought as to whether someone deliberately planted them to mark the edge of the path. He rests a hand against one of the trees wondering how old it is. Twenty years? Fifty? More? He doesn't know.

"How old is the map Randall?"

Randall shrugs.

"I haven't looked, Do you need to know now?"

He shakes his head and the path takes a sharp turn to their left and brings them up to a rough cliff face that it then skirts round. Jack holds out his hand to stop them from going further.

"We should be careful. Yeah? It might not be him. Might even be some animal dragged him or his gear."

Randall stares at him.

"You worried about bears or wolves? I thought we were off the trail here?"

Jack shrugs.

"Just be careful. All of us. No heroics. Ok."

.....

He thinks it is his mom he can hear, singing him a quiet lullaby, something soothing.

"Hold the dark my darling, hold her close. Have a little care. Hold the darkness closer love. Have some sympathy."

He remembers it from when he was a small boy. He'd bring home some wounded fledgling or stray and his mom would help him look after it until it could be released again or if it was beyond their money at the time it'd be taken to a no kill shelter.

Sometimes though she'd sit him on her knee, her cheek against his, the fullness of her face pressed against his a sweet smelling comfort.

"We gotta have sympathy for the animal Willy boy. Have some love. It's too broken up. We got to be the ones to share mercy. Help it into the darkness."

She'd sing the melody soft and kind and find a way to help its passing. Sometimes with a swift sharp break or a smother of something soft. She'd hold his hand and they'd both weep. It was a bitter kind of mercy. But it held him.

When she'd died it had been the same. A bitter kind of mercy. A rattle and hum of going away.

He listens to the voice. Like water over stones. He holds onto the darkness. For just a little longer he thinks. Just an inch of more, close to his mom.

.....

Hannibal gets up from beside the fire and adds two more lengths from the nearby woodpile. It feels as though Will might be close. As he shifts Wen raises her head from the other side of Will's mat and regards him.

"I should get you water? Yes."

He walks to the entrance of his tent, Wen tracking his movement as he goes and then brings back her collapsible bowl.

He picks up one of the water bottles next to the fire and empties it into the bowl and sets it before her. She regards him some more and then shifts up onto her haunches so she can drink from it.

He sets up the pan Abel used to sterilise two of the other water bottles and the tubing for the drip for Tobias and fills it with water. They have to keep going. Eat. Collect water. Keep the fire alight. In Tobias' and Jack's tent he can hear Abel murmuring. He can't tell if there's any response but that doesn't matter. If Tobias has any kind of consciousness left then awareness of others near and caring will be some kind of something, maybe not enough for comfort but something.

He sighs and walks back to his tent for one of the group's food bags. Whenever the three get back, with or without the lost mycologist they will be hungry. He can't remember when they all last ate. Breakfast? Maybe. A while ago.

He checks the bag and then makes a start on what, in his head he calls supper. As he does so he sings a low quiet song to himself. Something only partly remembered from his own childhood. Gently. Some of it hummed when he can only half recall the words. Some of it in English, the chorus in Lithuanian. A song about sweetness and a man who went searching for bees in a forest. He can't recall all the verses now. He wonders if perhaps Mischa can.

He gets the pasta cooking and then starts work on six onions. Chopping them fine on a thin plastic board rested atop a log. He throws the skins into the fire and watches them curl, producing a thin acrid smoke. The wind catches it and the smoke skittles around the fire. Wen huffs at the smell.

Will mutters something and Hannibal shifts the frying pan to the edge of the fire resting on the stones there so that it won't overbalance and tip their food into the embers and ash. He scatters the onions in where they start to sizzle and then wipes his hands on a pocket square moistened with water from a bottle.

"Will?"

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Chapter 22

His eyes swivel round and he tries again to focus. So thirsty now. So horrendously thirsty. If he had the energy he'd crawl to the cave wall and press his face against any moisture there. He's afraid that if he shifts even a little he'll topple sideways and that will be it for him. Somehow, in some stupid way, he thinks that sitting up means there's still hope. Maybe that's a function of the thirst, his brain on dehydration, all his organs shrivelling. At least the cave is cool. Maybe safe too. Safer anyways. The first night he'd had enough capacity to light a fire at the entrance and it had kept him warm and safe. He can't even crawl now. He's got nothing left.

He shifts his eyes to look at his hands, held limply in his lap. He's not sure he could manage enough energy to send a signal from his brain to one of them to move. They're so far away now he thinks. So far.

He can hear a sound and realises it's his own hasping breath. It sounds rusted. Full of iron gone wrong, shredded by the air over time. He closes his eyes again. At least he's warm enough though the thirst cuts through any real attempt at sleep.

He wonders a few minutes later if he's delirious because there are voices and then hands and then something pressed against his mouth. He splutters, but some of it goes down. Then a little more. Then more. Slowly. Slowly. As if he might drown otherwise.

"Eldon Stammetts?"

He manages a nod, and the man kneeling beside him rubs a brisk hand over his own face.

"Thank god."

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Abel hunkers down beside Will next to the fire again.

"You remember anything else?"

Will's voice is a little slurred but he manages.

"The dead deer. I remember the dead deer we found, it had flowers, where her heart should be."

Hannibal covers his hand with his own and squeezes lightly. Will shifts his eyes to look at him.

"You were angry. Before. I'm sorry."

He can see the anguish that chases shadows over Hannibal's face like a wind-blown cloud across the sun.

“We got past that. It doesn’t matter at all. Don’t worry now, we can go over anything that doesn’t come back to you. Do you know what else has happened?”

Will closes his eyes again and the other men wait. Wen licks the hand down near her head and the corner of Will’s mouth twitches.

“Tobias? He’s bad. We were going to phone. We need to call the service.”

He struggles as if to try and sit and Hannibal presses a gentle hand to his shoulder. Abel sighs.

“We tried. Matthew and Jack went to the top of the peak. Will, someone fucked with the batteries. They’re both gone. Is there a spare?”

Will blinks at him, still disoriented but rallying gradually.

“How can they be gone? I checked it. I’m sure I did. Couple of days ago, when Fred fell. Just to see if there was a signal. It was fine back then. I couldn’t get a connection, but it was working, there was power.”

Hannibal and Abel exchange a look.

“In that case it has been tampered with since then. Someone must have taken it from your bag or from our tent.”

“Well. But who can have had access?” He winces as his head throbs and Hannibal carefully gives him some more water. “Thank you... Damn. Ok that’s too much for me. Fred fell, I tried that evening. They left the next day, him and Randall. Right. Most of us went to the lake.Toby stayed.”

Abel picks up.

“Yes. He stayed. Didn’t he say he thought there was something?”

Hannibal interjects slowly.

“I thought that was about the book?”

“The book?”

“Fred wrote some notes in the back of a book. Possibly Matthew’s or Randall’s. I’m not sure now. But that’s not what you mean Abel?”

“No. It was while he was waiting. On his own. He thought there was someone watching. But you know how he is, he put it down to spooking himself. Then Randall got back and then we all piled in back from the lake.”

Will lifts the hand Wen has been diligently cleaning, and then rubs it through her fur.

“We’d talked about fungus down at the lake. Randall and Tobias weren’t there for that discussion.”

The three men consider this.

“But we have all used the playing cards? And I imagine it is not so unknown?”

Abel sighs again.

“So. That night, after Randall got back most of the group slept in shelters. There was that storm. How long was your tent empty Will? That tree came down and you checked the other tents? Right? And then went to check the shelter site? Hannibal, you were in a shelter, yeah? So the tent was empty.”

“Wen was there.”

“Would she be aggressive if anyone tried to get stuff from the tent?”

“She knows you all, so, no, probably not. Not if it was one of the group.”

Wen makes a soft noise, aware she is being discussed. Will rubs her ears with a gentling hand.

“So, there’s a short window then, what? Half an hour in the pouring rain? And we know Randall was missing for some of that time. He could have got past you? Couldn’t he?”

They’re all quiet again. Slowly Abel continues.

“So it could have gone then. But it could have gone later. Some other time. When your bag was unattended. Or your tent. Maybe. We had your friends, the rangers with us for one night didn’t we? But Tobias wasn’t ill then. So if someone took it that night of the storm, or anytime before he got ill, who ever it was, it was pre-emptive. They knew what they were going to do and they wanted him out of the way.”

“What they were going to do? With what? The pills? The bear safe? Or because of something he knows? Or they think he knows? Or saw? Or something Fred said to him? Or what?”

Hannibal squeezes Will’s hand again.

“We need to find the book. You said he wrote Franklyn a letter. Do we know where that is?”

“He said it was in his notebook. I think it was in the pocket of his vest.”

“Abel?”

Abel straightens up and is back a minute or two later.

“He’s asleep. I didn’t disturb him. I’m hoping the line is helping. Will we got an IV into Toby, just saline and some painkillers but better than nothing.”

“Yeah? You use the water bottles? I’ve read about it before, that’s a good idea. You find the notebook?”

Abel holds the small moleskine book up. Just slightly bigger than the palm of his hand, held closed by an elastic band. He opens it and in the back there’s a sealed envelope with Franklyn’s name on it.

“One of us has to read it. Shall I?”

He slits it open carefully and reads the three and half sides of paper. Then he refolds them into the envelope and tucks it back inside.

“I’ll make sure Franklyn gets it.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing at all. It’s entirely domestic.”

He swallows hard, then stands and gazes around him at their camp, the old outhouse, the broken down cabin with its stone chimney, so many dreams built and broken he thinks and he looks then as close to crying as they’ve seen him.

“I will kill who ever did this.”

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It takes them a while to get some water and salts into Stammetts, he splutters his way through four ounces, then a little more and though he needs at least another pint they take it slowly; no point drowning the guy or overwhelming his system.

Jack gathers the dispersed belongings he'd dropped at the entrance to the cave all together.

"You leave this stuff out here deliberately so someone would know to look?"

Stammetts tries to focus on him, and his voice is a rasp when he finally speaks.

"There were wolves. I wasn't really thinking it through. I got a fire lit though, to keep them away."

Randall and Matthew exchange a look, there's nothing there in the entranceway, but it's not so unusual for someone with dehydration to imagine things or have mild hallucinations. Maybe the guy has a touch of hypothermia too. It would explain the discarded gear.

Matthew takes a puffy from Jack when it is handed to him.

"We've got a camp near by. One of our group isn't so well so we can take it slow. Ok?"

He helps Stammetts thread his arms through the sleeves of the jacket and then pulls the hood over his head to help conserve heat amd does the drawstring up around his face.

"Ok. You've got some colour back already. We get a bit more water in you then we should be able to manage you between us. Rands? What do you think?"

His friend nods.

"If Jack will take all the gear, Stammetts' as well as ours I think we'll be good. Jack?"

Jack looks at their three day bags and the larger ruck-sac that Stammetts had been carrying.

"Sure, we can do that. You've pegged me for the gear haven't you. Hey, I'm not objecting. Ok then. Another ten minutes."

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The silence between Abel and Hannibal and Will stretches as Abel eventually gets up.

“I’m going to look in Randall’s tent. For the book. Ok? If you hear them coming back give me a shout? Or something. You know, warn me.”

“They’re not here? Why?”

Will looks between Hannibal and Abel a sharp query across his face. Abel looks down at them for a moment and then across the clearing.

“Fuck it. Will. We didn’t tell you. God. This is so messed up. He and Jack and Matt have gone to see if they can find Stammetts.” He rubs a tired hand across his jaw.

Hannibal sees the look on Abel’s face and continues.

“When Jack and Matthew tried the phone at the top of the peak Jack could see something, what looked like either a person or some gear on an outcrop below the overhang. We looked at the map, Randall is guiding the others.”

The three of them go quiet again. Will groans softly and Hannibal carefully strokes his face.

“Randall is? Well. Damn. I hope they all make it back then. Shit. Ok. Yeah. There’s a cave down there, you can’t reach it from the summit. He is right though, there’s a path that runs along the base. You said he has a map? Good. I don’t tend to use the path from this camp. There’s a different route up there. But if it is the ranger’s guy and he found the cave that’s not a bad place. It’s dry and there’s a small spring at the back. Or there should be, if there’s enough melt come down. If he’s not hurt and he has water and some warm clothes he shouldn’t have died of exposure at least. Dev said he had his pack, was that what Jack saw?”

“He wasn’t specific. Just some kit and he thought maybe a body?”

Will grimaces.

“How long have they been gone?”

Hannibal checks his wrist watch.

“Maybe an hour? Perhaps a bit longer?”

“Ok, if they took time to find the path and deal with whatever they find I’d reckon another twenty minutes tops. But maybe not.”

He looks again at Abel.

“Don’t risk the book now. We can ask Matthew later. It won’t seem weird coming from him if he asks Randall for it.”

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The group gathered by the fire hear voices only ten minutes later.

“You got food sorted? Yes. Tell me you have. Otherwise one of you is going on the fire.”

Jack is ahead of Randall and Matthew as they come into the clearing, Eldon Stammetts supported between the two men. Abel and Hannibal stand to meet them half way, and Jack comes to the fire beside Will and drops the gear he’d carried for all of them.

“You awake? Jesus wept. Thank Christ. We found the guy. In a cave of all things. Dehydration. We got half a pint of water and shit into him. Man I am shattered.”

He breathes hard between each comment and lowers himself onto the spot on the groundsheet Abel had vacated.

“How you doing?”

Will watches Jack’s face. There’s something to be said for those who are long habituated to caring even in the face of their own adversity. Jack may have gone into surgery but Will can see there the perhaps no nonsense compassion that probably aids his work with patients and their families. He wonders for a moment about that journalist, and what kind of shrift she gets from Jack.

“Groggy. My memory is a bit patchy. Hannibal and Abel have filled me in a bit. You’ve got the phone still?”

“Yeah. Shit. I’m going to check on Toby. Fucking hell.”

He lumbers up to his feet and Will doesn’t try to hold him back, just watches as he heads for his tent. He closes his eyes then as he thinks about how they will manage three ill people, yeah he thinks, not just ill, vulnerable, profoundly and intensely vulnerable.

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As the evening draws in Jack stays with Tobias in their tent to eat his food. He and Abel change the IV bag and they prepare a third, he manages not to catch Abel's eye as they work together to bring Toby what ever comfort and ease that they might. His breath is coming in short attenuated gasps now and he seems to have sunk lower into himself. Abel finishes wiping his face and turns to Jack.

"He wrote a letter to Franklyn. I've got it now, but do you want to take it? Give it to him? I guess you're as near to family as dammit."

Jack looks at him then and Abel swallows hard at the hurt he sees there.

"You hang on to it for now Abe. Ok. If I take it..."

He stops. And Abel understands what he means. If he takes it, it will mean that there will be an end. And soon.

"I got you Jack. Ok. I got you. And Toby. Ok."

He reaches across Toby in the shuttered light of the candle lantern hung from the apex of the roof and rests a hand on Jack's shoulder. Jack lowers his head and they both sit there in the quiet against a backdrop of Tobias' laboured breathing.

At the firepit the rest of the group listen to the disjointed story that Eldon Stammetts can manage. Carefully rehydrated over the late afternoon and evening he is showing every sign of recovering properly. Will too is sitting up in one of the origami mat chairs he'd recommended to everyone. His head still throbs but his neck is not stiff and there is no new swelling and both Hannibal and he are cautiously optimistic.

Matthew smiles at him tightly when he comes to sit near by.

"I looked at the ropes. Someone definitely fucked with them. But I can't tell when. The line was soaked through which I guess means it rained before and after someone tied it but apart from that? I don't know what else to look for?"

Will pulls Wen a little closer in to his side and she leans and rumbles deep in her chest. Matthew extends a hand to stroke her ears. Will suspects its a substitute for reaching out and giving his own head a good pat. Matthew catches the sardonic expression on his face.

"Yeah. All right. I am that transparent. I know. But someone, some fucker? Not if I can help it, right Will? I know Hannibal will do everything, but I'm a loyal bastard. I'd take a bullet for you, same as for all my friends. Toby? If I find out who..."

Will buries his face in Wen's neck, then ducks a look up at him.

"I understand. I really do. But if someone messed with the ropes? And the pills, and the batteries, and Fred's shoe. Even the flash of light that almost caused Toby to fall? And Toby himself. And, is that everything?"

"And the deer."

Abel sits himself down on Matthew’s other side. Will nods slowly.

“It has a slightly different feel to it don’t you think? More like some odd ritual somehow. But yes. The deer too. Along with the rest of it. What ever Fred saw? That night? He fell the very next day. Even that tree coming down. I checked the route when I was last up here, to hang the bear safe."

He realises that most of the group gathered round the fire has gone quiet as they listen to him. The only person absent is Jack, still with Tobias. In particular he sees that Eldon Stammetts is frowning, not so surprising he thinks, he may have fallen out of the frying pan and into the fire after all.

"You've had some trouble by the sound of it?"

Randall snorts.

"Almost from the get go. Though Will can't help the terrible weather we've had. That bad storm? You must have been caught in it?"

Stammetts nods.

"I panicked when I got separated from the Warden I was with. I just got turned around. I was lucky I had my gear with me. My rain cape doubles as a kind of shelter. It wasn't something I'd want to repeat in a hurry..."

He swallows. Either because his throat is still sore, or because of the terrible lurching memory that comes up, the utter sick feeling you get when you realise you are properly lost.

"... but I was ok. I dropped my filter though." He pauses as though something he had forgotten has come back to him. "I was at a water seep. There were wolf tracks there, human too, boots, you know. I wondered if it was Elliott, you know, the Warden, or maybe someone they sent out after me. They did, didn't they? Send someone, they must have because you knew to look for me."

Hannibal nods at him.

"We met two of the men, they do have a search going for you. We promised we would keep an eye out, check along side trails for any sign you might have left."

Stammetts nods.

"Well I'm grateful. Truly. Even if you've been through some shit, you saved my skin."

He pauses again.

"I didn't see anything either. Or anyone. Not even any litter. Oh. Except a bandanna. Near the seep. There's a really narrow path there above a steep drop, you know it? Sheer cliff above, not many hand holds. Someone had put those climbing things into a couple of cracks there."

"Yeah." Randall interjects. "The guy who fell, hurt his ankle? I took him back that way, Will knocked those things in, they're called 'friends' someone had threaded a line through it, like a make-do handrail."

Stammetts stares at him for a moment.

"Maybe I was that way before you then, there was no rope there. Just the two metal clips, I found the bandana kind of stuffed behind a rock there. Sort of in a crack. Hey. I've still got it."

He fumbles in his jacket pocket.

"Oh. Maybe I don't. I must have dropped it. Maybe when I dropped the filter. I heard wolves there. Or something, kind of howling. Horrible noise. I'm not ashamed to say I just ran."

The others nod, it's always easy to be brave in theory rather than in the face of something unknown and rumoured to be threatening.

"Elliott told me about the wolves, it was why we were real careful. He said the bears are waking up too. It was a bad berry season last fall, might be a bit grumpy. He made kind of a joke about it but I could tell he was worried."

He makes a disconsolate noise.

"No one said anything about any other kind of trouble up here though. The opposite. The guys at the Ranger's station said there's been nothing up here for years. I was a bit curious, you know? I looked it up when I saw I was coming out here."

Will holds up a hand.

"It was five years ago. Guy had a heart attack, didn't even make it out of his tent. He hadn't left his itinerary with the Park guys or the Rangers. No one knew to look for him until his cousin reported him missing."

All the men turn to him.

"It does happen. Not too often, but now and again."

No one says anything. Stammetts looks around the group.

"Ok. Sorry. I just. You left an itinerary though right? Mr Crawford said your phone was screwed. He didn't say what happened exactly."

Matthew eases into the conversation even though the guy is looking at Will.

"Just a problem with the battery, Abel's good with that kind of shit. If anyone can rig it in the field he can."

He turns to look at his colleague.

"You did that kind of thing all the time didn't you? Make do and mend. What's that saying 'Use it up, wear it out, make it do..."

Abel laughs.

"... or do without' sure, could be the Peace Corp unofficial motto. I can look at it, of course. I should have thought of that earlier."

He doesn't make a deal of it and Will realises that Abel and Matthew have agreed this in advance, just in case a good moment arose to get it into the conversation. But for whose benefit has this small trap been laid, he wonders, if it even is one.

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When night falls the group head for their own tents and Eldon Stammetts is bedded down in a shelter made from three of the waterproof ponchos. Hannibal and Abel help Will to his tent and Abel manages a careful examination of his skull with the aid of torch and candlelight.

As he finishes up he murmurs to them both.

"Matthew's going to see if he can at least get a look at that book Fred and Tobias were reading, he says he gave it to Randall, I'm not sure if it was a loan or a gift, but he'll try. Jack told him no heroics earlier so he said he wont fuck around about it."

Hannibal leans closer to him.

"Did you agree about the phone? Or is there anything you can do with it?"

"Always worth a look with these things. Did Jack give it back to you?"

Will shakes his head.

"He still has it, he must have taken it with him when they went to try and find Stammetts."

Abel nods.

"Ok. So he's probably still got it. Or Matthew has." He leans in then himself, the three men forming a tight group. "What do you make of Stammetts? Does his story all add up?"

Will nods.

"The getting lost bit? Yes. The rest of it? Dehyrdration? A touch of exposure? They can both seriously disorient you. He could easily have got things muddled up, or in the wrong order, or even imagined them. I'm surprised he's functioning as well as he is."

Abel blows out his cheeks.

"Could he be putting it on? No. Don't answer that, we've got no way of telling right now, have we? Alright then. We'll do what we can in the morning."

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A few hours later, in that thin crepuscular light that presages dawn Hannibal is woken by someone at the door of the tent, he fumbles at the velcro and then the zip and frowns at Randall.

"Jack asked me to get you, he thinks Toby is a lot worse. I'll get Abel too."

Hannibal fumbles his way out of the quilt and blankets and leans over Will to whisper in Wen's ear. She grumbles a little and puts a paw over her eyes. He stumbles in the dark but eventually pulls on some corded pants and a jumper over his sleep wear. The plus-suppresants seem to be at the right dose now as neither he or Will are fevered or so out of control and he feels the keen edged chill of the night.

As he grabs a torch he has a moments pause, just in case this is some kind of trick on Randall's part. He reaches for his pack and finds his hunting knife in its sheath. He undoes the tab that keeps it in place inside the leather, and slides the whole thing sheath and knife down the outside of his fleece sleep socks, and then pulls on his boots.

Outside, in the gloom he can see Abel emerging from his tent and Randall and Matthew across on the other side of the fire pit crouched down beside the entrance to Jack and Tobias'. He and Abel join them there.

As they wait for Jack to tell them was has happened Matthew looks round.

"I'm surprised we didn't wake Stammetts. Hannibal?"

With a sinking feeling Hannibal crosses the clearing to the make-shift shelter and kneels beside it. When he gets the door open there is no one there.

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Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

CW: Character deaths

The shit gets real.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal looks inside the shelter and then steps up and away and walks back to the group gathered outside Jack and Tobias' tent. The three men standing there look at him, eyes wide, and he thinks, for the first time perhaps actually properly frightened.

Inside the tent Jack looks up at them from his sorrowful vigil.

"What's happened?"

Hannibal pauses.

"Stammetts is gone. He has taken his bag but left his sleeping gear, is it possible he was more addled by dehydration than he let on?"

Jack shakes his head.

"I didn't think he was so bad. We got a couple of pints of water in him didn't we? that should have done the job, shouldn't it. I think so."

He sounds unsure, uncertainty threaded through his voice. Maybe the first time in a long while that any of them have heard him waver in intent or purpose or understanding.

"Maybe he was just scared?"

They look at Randall.

"I am. Aren't you? Fuck..." He shudders and bows his head then looks at Jack. "What about Toby?"

Jack slumps in his origami chair beside Tobias again.

"I think we're just waiting now. He's not shown any kind of response for hours. I've tried everything. I think we all have. I asked Will about an emitic, but he says by this stage the damage has all been done internally. It's that fungus we saw at the lake? Destroying Angel, beautiful name isn't it." He sounds so tired as he says it. "But it destroys all the organs. you

get a brief respite, terrible really, because you think you might be recovering a bit, and then you get much, much worse. The painkillers? Just taking the edge off it really... the fluids might have helped."

He stops and the five of them listen to Tobias' breathing. Slow. Catching. Breaking. The gaps between each inhale and exhale aren't like the breathing you normally get when someone is naturally asleep. When the gap is longer they find they are all holding their breath with him. And then he starts again, and they do too. For all that they are collectively no strangers to death in many different forms, some of them violent, it is hard to see their friend fail before their eyes.
Jack sighs, all of his life seems wound up in sighs now.

“I might have been a bit pre-emptive. I’m not sure if he’s going to... well, I don’t know what’s going to happen really. I’m sorry I got you all up. I guess I just thought...” he stops again. “Well. At least we know about Stammetts. He couldn’t have just gone to the cat holes could he?”
Hannibal looks at Randall and Matthew.

“I’m sorry. I know it is an annoyance. Could I ask you to look?”

The two men don’t quite look at each other and Hannibal realises they might each be somewhat wary of the other, or of anyone in the group now. Abel perhaps recognises some of the same feeling.

“All three of us will go. Guys? Ok? Means we’re leaving a sensible number here as well. Ok? In case he’s gonna go ape shit on us.”

There are nods all round and a few minutes later Hannibal is left alone with Jack and a static-breathed Tobias. He looks across the clearing with its straight line of sight to his and Will’s tent. All seems quiet and he is more glad than ever that Wen is there with him.

“Hannibal? How much shit do you think we’re in?”

Hannibal crouches beside the entrance.

“With Stammetts gone? On the most basic of practical levels it makes things easier for us, just Will and Tobias to support. On a wider level? I am deeply concerned.”

“You think he didn’t go off his own bat?”

“I just don’t know. And he was clearly frightened, either by us, or something he has encountered in the woods that we are unaware of. Did anyone ask him about the deer?”

Jack shakes his head.

“I don’t know. I missed all of that really. I’m in the dark here.”

He glances round his tent.

“Fuck. In every way. Thanks for not reminding me this was all my idea. Because Bella surely will. Not unkindly, just. You know. It seemed like a good idea.”

Hannibal nods at him.

“It did. It was. I think we both know there is something more. Something that we are only seeing the edges of, something pervasive and cruel.”

“Something that followed us here? Is that what you think?”

Hannibal shook his head.

“I don’t know. Matthew said that Will’s friend said it was haunted up here on the Peak.”

“Alana? The supplier woman? Yeah. Fred said that too. But I don’t know what that means really? What do we do next do you think?”

“I’m not sure what we can do in the dark. When the others come back we should all try and get some more sleep. I shall talk to Will and we will try and decide in the morning. Are you going to stay awake now?”

“I’ll try and catch a few z’s. Fuck it. I’m pretty useless already. But not enough sleep on top of that? I’ll be seeing things and jumping at every noise. Yeah don’t make that face. Maybe it’s good if I am, right? Sure. Maybe it is.”

Hannibal turns when he hears the three other men return.

“Nothing?”

Abel shakes his head.

“You got any great ideas? Because I am flat out?”

“We should all sleep, Abel, are you content to sleep on your own?”

Abel snorts.

“I was until about five seconds ago. Aww. Fuck it. Jack? You willing to shove over a bit? Think you can fit me in? We can take turns sitting up with Toby?”

Randall, Matthew and Hannibal head back to their respective tents leaving Jack and Abel the time and the space to sort themselves out.

“We will do a modest search in the morning. And then? Then we will have to decide what to do next.”

“Partly down to Toby isn’t it? Does Abel think we can move Will ok?”

Hannibal rubs a hand over his face. His stubbled jaw is almost beyond the itchy not quite a beard stage but it is still a welcome distraction to run his hand over it. It has come in greyer

than he expected and had been mildly chagrined when Will had smirked something about badgers and silver foxes. He shakes himself.

“Another as yet unknown. Get some sleep both of you. We will all feel, not better, but more able to face the day. I hope.”

In his own tent Hannibal finds Will and Wen are both sleeping. He doesn’t bother to change his clothes just pulls one of the sleeping quilts over him, and then the hood of his sleep shirt up and around his ears. He is almost surprised to have no recollection later of how fast he fell asleep.

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The grey light of dawn shifts into a clear blue sky. It is a beautiful day. The grassy bald they are camped on is covered with small flowers tentatively putting out new shoots, in the margins of the woods there is more birdsong and the rustle of small mammals and insects. From somewhere deeper into the undergrowth there is the noise of something larger, perhaps a porcupine or white tail deer.

Of the wolf pack there is no sound. Nor have any of the migrant bear community wound their way up here. Will may have explained this part of the trail is off their usual route but it’s not so unexpected that it is a latent fear in the group that they will turn a corner on any given path and come face to face with a discontented black bear. Or a grizzly. Or any seven foot monstrosity of teeth and claw that brooks no argument. No one who goes into the woods should read or watch The Revenant, nor Grizzly Man, nor any National Geographic documentary. No one who wants to sleep serenely any way.

None of them have slept serenely.

The five of them still standing gather at the fire pit.

“Ok. Toby is still breathing. And that’s all I can say for him. Abel?”

Abel raises a weary hand.

“Yeah, present, alive, gimme some coffee and I might make it through.”

Matthew snorts.

“Yeah ok. We’re all still here. So. Will ok?”

Hannibal nods and Matthew resumes.

“Good. That’s something. Ok. So we gotta get on top of this a bit. Water. Wood. Someone check the cat holes. Breakfast. Coffee. We’ll get a fire lit again. Let’s do this shit and then we can plan when we’re not all going to fucking fall on our faces from low blood sugar or thirst, or no fucking caffeine, or not enough sleep. Yeah?”

Everyone nods and he settles into the temporary authority he’s been collectively granted.

“Good. Ok. Hannibal, wood? Abel and Jack, water and cat holes. Check the markers. I can’t even remember if we did them yesterday. Did we? Yeah? Fuck. Randall, you stay with Toby, just check his IV and shit. I’ll get the fire going and then I’m going to make the biggest kettle of coffee I can. Then I’ll make yours. And I’ll get some oat meal going. Hannibal, can you ask Will about the food cards and meals for today? Great. Ok. Let’s do it. Breakfast in about thirty minutes once I get the fire fucking lit.”

No one demurs, perhaps relieved that someone has stepped up.

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Food, water, caffeine and warmth all do their work. Ninety minutes later Abel and Jack have even managed to give Tobias a wash in some warm water and his line has been changed. Hannibal has helped Will to a chair beside the fire again where he can poke at the flames with a long stick and nudge lengths of wood into the embers when it begins to have consumed itself. The woodpile has been added to. There is filtered water again. Matthew has checked the bear safe and all their food stocks and consolidated anything that has somehow been dispersed.

“Yeah. Ok guys. We gonna do a brief survey of the area see if there’s any sign of him. Hannibal can you grab the phone, Abel, anything you can think of to get it going, now would be the time, right? Randall, can you bring your map, Will have you got the others? We’ve all got compasses that we’re handed out, right? Ok. I just want to make sure none of us get fucking lost. We have to at least see if we can work out where he went even if we can’t work out why. And guys, we have to work together right? Jack, I don’t reckon this was the team building you had in mind you fucker but that’s what we’ve got.”

The group stare at him and then Jack slaps a hand on his thigh.

“You’re a shit. But you’re right. Fuck’s sake. Will? Anything to add or did he hit it?”

Will shrugs a little.

“Pretty much. You’ve done good this morning. If we can find Stammetts before we lose the daylight that’s good. If not, I think we have to give him up as a bad job and get on with sorting ourselves out. Toby?”

Jack holds out a hand and rocks it in the universal sign of ‘it’s fucked but not clear how badly and how soon’.

Will nods.

“Ok then. Stammetts and then us. And Abel I’ll look at the phone with you.”

It sounds like a course of action they can all get behind. But it’s astonishing how quickly it falls apart.

Randall comes back to the fire.

“My map and compass are gone. They’re just not there. I had them in my day bag. The bag’s there. But it’s not inside. Fuck.”

Hannibal brings back the satellite phone in its plastic case from his and Will’s tent, he passes it to Will who knows before he’s opened it simply from the weight alone that something is wrong. The phone is gone. He stares at Hannibal and then asks quietly.

“Check the maps and the meds.”

Hannibal grimaces and goes back to their tent when he returns his expression is tight and he leans in and whispers to Will.

“The maps are gone. But the meds are there.” He sees the expression on Will’s face, a mix of alarm and fear. “I’ll check them now.”

Will tracks his movements back to the tent and he realises he’s clutched Wen’s scruff of neck fur a little hard when she whines at him. When he returns he says.

“I’ll keep them on me at all times now. They’re still alright. But they weren’t in the bowl at the door, I had put them in my pillow sack. Just in case.”

Will breathes out a long anxious breathe he may not have been aware he was holding.

“Ok, that’s good. That’s something. But the maps? That’s bad.”

“Could Stammetts have taken them?”

Will makes a face.

“I just don’t see when, the timing is all over the place.”

They wait for everyone to reconvene and Matthew looks grey when he says,

“Ok. Shit. Randall? Can you check the cave? Abel, the path to the peak? Jack, stay with Toby. Hannibal stay with Will. I’ll try the path that we came up originally. Yeah? Everyone take a whistle? And for fucks sake, no heroics. You see him, blow that fucker. He must have completely lost it. Everyone back here in an hour? Should be long enough. Right?”

The group are a little slow to act this time. But no one argues. All of them used to taking second to whoever is lead in the operating theatre. Hannibal sits opposite Will at the fire.

“I will do everything in my power to get us both home safely.”

Will takes his hand.

“I know you will. Ok. I know you will. But it goes both ways. We have to both get back? Right? Both of us.”

Hannibal shakes his head. Not in disagreement, just in a modest kind of despair.

“I should make something for everyone. Lunch will come up on us and everyone will be hungry. Can we manage that do you think?”

Will squeezes his hand again before letting go.

“Oddly domestic?”

“Something to ground us in the chaos of the moment? Yes. Perhaps. Food can do that. How is Wen?”

Will rubs a hand through her fur she shakes her head at him.

“Maybe hungry. Will you make something for her too? And some more water? And coffee for me?”

Hannibal sends him a sardonic look but he fetches Wen’s water bowl and then carries on with preparing some food for the group. He passes Will the occasional thing to chop and they both manage to relax into the mundanity of the chore.

It is only forty minutes or so before Abel is back. He flops down beside the fire near the two men.

“Nothing. Not a thing. Couldn’t see anything either.” He pauses for a breath. “Amazing views. You can see a hell of a long way from up there. But I couldn’t see any sign of humanity. Except for some smoke over westaways. Not a big deal, I don’t think, not a forest fire. But a sort of thin column coming up. What’s that? A camp fire?”

Will frowns.

“West? Maybe. Though there’s a wood free zone a few miles away. But people ignore it all the time. So it could be some other campers. Garrett has people out this weekend. Didn’t Randall say? Some Scouts or kids? I think he mentioned it. He’s not usually one to flout the rules but it could be them. How far do you think?”

Abel shrugs.

“I’m not so good at distances, but I’d say a few miles. Too far for it to be Stammetts though. I think. Fuck. I don’t know. Not a forest fire. Fuck. Better not be.”

“There are spotters. If it is a fire they’ll be on it fast. The rain’s on our side for once. That storm soaked things thoroughly and it’s been a wet walk into Spring so far this year.”

Abel smiles faintly.

“Yeah? Ok. Good. You’re looking brighter too. Take your meds? Don’t forget them in the middle of all of this. Ok? Can I have a look?”

Will leans his head forwards and Abel runs a careful hand through his hair feeling for the lump on his head that the bear safe left.

“Still tender? Yeah. No swelling though. That’s good. I still don’t want to move you just yet. Another twenty four hours, maybe thirty six. Just to be double cautious. You know. Belt and braces. If we had to?”

He imitates the hand movement Jack had used earlier.

“I don’t want to. But we could. And by the end of today we’ll get you standing up and down see if you can keep your balance. Inner ears are temperamental little fuckers, but you don’t seem to be showing signs of dizziness. Any problems when you sit up or turn over?”

“I felt giddy the first few hours after I woke up, but that’s worn off. The head’s a bit tender, like you said. But I think I was lucky.”

He sees Abel raise his eyebrows.

“Ok. Not lucky. Someone had it in for me. That’s not lucky. But I suppose lucky it wasn’t worse.”

Abel nods as if satisfied by his reply. He turns towards Jack and Tobias’ tent and raises his voice.

“Jack? You want coffee?”

They hear a grunted assent from the tent and Abel stands to fill the empty water pot perched on the edge of the fire pit.

“I didn’t see Randall from the top of the peak? But it was only a brief look.” He smirks. “I’m not so great with vertigo myself. Not my idea of a good time at all. Climbing and crap like that. Mrs G? That’s her bag.”

The men finish up the lunch preparation and Abel makes them all coffee.

“Are we switching only to stuff that’s in sealed packets?”

He handles a vacuum pack of dried milk as he says it. Will takes it from him and looks at the seal.

“If someone pisses about with any of these we can tell. The vacuum won’t hold. Even if someone injects something, air will leak in. You know? Right? That is... unless...”

Abel takes it back from him.

“Yeah. Unless. Fuck it. We’re really flying blind here aren’t we?”

They all turn as Matthew comes back into the clearing. He joins them in a breathless heap by the fire.

“Ok. Nothing. Shit. Not a goddam thing. He didn’t go back that way. Or if he did there’s no trace. And surely there’d have been something? In the dark? Fucking hell. Abel?”

He shakes his head too.

“Nothing. Not a thing. We’ve got nothing.”

Will dips his head in thought, then holds up a hand.

“Look. If he fucked with the batteries in the phone and then took it yesterday. It’s not impossible he wouldn’t have tried to get up higher to make a call. Rust Peak is only a false summit right? There’s another path that goes higher. Top of Blood Mountain? If he’s panicking? Even if he’s not responsible for the other shit? He might just be scared?”

Matthew nods and looks at Abel.

“Ok. Yeah. Ok. That makes sense. As much as any of this does. Right? Abel. We should try. I don’t know. I don’t want any of us on our own. Not really. You up for it?”

Abel looks behind them to the path that leads out of the clearing and then on up to the first peak.

“Oh yeah. That’s just peachy.”

He rolls his eyes.

“No, it’s fine. I’m willing. Alright. Eat when we get back? Give me something to hurry up for?”

They leave quickly and Hannibal looks at Will again.

“Do you really think so?”

“I don’t know. It, well, it’s not out of the question. And he might have just wanted to find any way out, he’s got no reason to trust any of us.”

Hannibal looks around.

“Randall is not back.”

“Matty and Abel might meet him coming back. They could take him with them. Safety in numbers and everything?”

They talk quietly and Hannibal remembers that Abel had promised Jack coffee. He makes a mug full and goes to the tent and comes back almost immediately. Will looks a query at him.

“He is asleep. I thought it kinder not to wake him.”

They sit and talk quietly, Hannibal breaks up some of the lengths of wood in the woodpile, Will washes out some of the plates and mugs that are close to hand. Wen snuffles her way into the edges of the clearing.

She is just beyond Will’s sight when he hears her bark.

“Wen? What is it? Hannibal?”

Hannibal hurries across the clearing and meets Wen coming back from somewhere in the undergrowth the hackles on her shoulders up and an incipient snarl on her jaws. She barks again and Hannibal pushes his way through after her into the darker area where the light doesn’t reach. As he moves the colour is leached from around him with the absence of direct sunlight. Here there is less sign of life, just dark bristling undergrowth and the push of pine and birch desperate to find the sunlight.

She shoulders her way ahead of him. And stops and barks at something hung in the trees. Hannibal catches up to her and lays a careful hand between her front shoulder blades. She grumbles but stills at his touch.

Ahead of them both, against the trunk of a dying chestnut Eldon Stammetts has been lashed to a tree and eviscerated. His discarded back pack lies at his feet and Hannibal can see that his guts have dropped. Someone had been horribly thorough. He feels compelled to check though and steps in to try for the man’s pulse in his neck. He pushes in with two fingers and hopes, if the truth be told, that there will be nothing.

He takes Stammetts’ bag back to the site and dumps the contents out beside Will. He runs a hand over his face again.

“He’s there. In the trees. Someone slashed him across the stomach. Single stroke. With some considerable force behind it. Sharp blade. An Alpha I think to have subdued him and strung him up.”

He toes through the items from the bag.

“Not the phone. He didn’t take it.” His look turns calculating and Will thinks he can almost see Hannibal’s train of thought. “But perhaps we won’t say so just yet?”

“You’re thinking we won’t tell the others?”

“If I hide the bag and we leave him there. I know. I know. It is not ideal. You’re concerned about carrion?”

“I’m not worried about the ravens. It’s the wolves. And bears. They’ll all smell it, and for them it’s like laying on a buffet. We’ll have them all here within a day, maybe less and they won’t be deterred by our presence. But...” Will sighs. “But we could also use it as a distraction. If we move the group and the camp...”

“Yes. I know it is horribly practical and almost inhuman in its callousness. I am sorry. You are not seeing me at my kindest but at my most ruthless. And where you are concerned I will be ruthless.”

Will nods at him.

“No. I get it. It is ruthless. But whoever is out here is ruthless and we have to meet it head on. I don’t see that we have an alternative. And this might be the first time we have the upper

hand because we know. And they don't know we do."

Hannibal stands again and repacks Stammetts ruck sack pausing only at a bandana he finds which he passes to Will. He walks back to the underbrush he had pushed through only ten minutes earlier. He's back quickly. And then makes some effort to hide traces of his passage through the brush.

Will holds out the bandana to him.

"This is Fred's isn't it? It's got his initials on it. It was true. Stammetts did find it at that water seep. But I still don't know what it means. Except they covered the same route, Stammetts in totally the wrong direction if he was trying to get back."

He stuffs the bandana into an inner pocket of his puffy.

"Ok. So we're going to have to come up with a reason to move. Especially given that it's probably impossible to move Toby."

"I will talk to Jack. I think we can trust him. Don't you?"

Will nods.

"I think we have to trust someone. Abel? Matthew? Randall? Don't they all have pluses and minuses against them. Don't I when it comes down to it? You asked me to trust you but I have to ask you to trust me as well. Same is true of Jack. Pluses and minuses. It's all a gamble now. But what will you say?"

Hannibal considers him.

"I regret I am going to ask him to consider something that goes against our every ethic and principle, but I am going to ask."

Will looks at him, the terrible realisation of what he means dawning on his face.

"Oh god. That's... what will he say?"

Hannibal stands and heads towards the tent. Before he has got all the way across Abel and Matthew rush back into the clearing both of them out of breath. Abel puts his hands on his thighs and bends over gasping for breath. For all that he is a runner this kind of terrain and pressured rush is nothing like the timed jogs he does round the park near his and Mrs G's home. Matthew comes a little closer to the fire but he too is winded when he drops to the ground and flops onto his back gasping like a freshly landed fish. Drowning in the air.

"We went up the mountain. Right to the top. There's nothing there, no sign, no phone. Nothing. But that's not it. We came back and had a quick look down from the peak to where you can see the path in front of the cave. Ok? Yeah? We could see something there. So we fucking ran all the way down and then back along that path. Yeah? Fuck, oh god. Ok. So the cave. There were scuffle marks and blood. And at the edge? Just this."

He sits up and holds out the bit of cloth in his hand.

“It’s Randall’s. His stupid pocket square. Fuck me. He must have been surprised and got pushed over the edge. There were scuffle marks there. Bit of blood but it looks like there was a fight.”

He pushes his arm over his eyes and they realise he is crying. Abel straightens up.

“I sat on Matthew’s legs so he could look over the edge there, cos I wasn’t doing it for love or money. But Matty looked. Randall’s down there. In a heap. Someone pushed him over. There’s no sign of Stammetts and someone goddam killed Randall.”

Will is about to tell them they found Stammetts so it can’t be him when he sees Hannibal shake his head sharply.

“Will, is there a way down? We must check. If there is anything to be done...”

“Not from up here. We’d have to go down and round or round and then down. But there’s no direct route. Are you sure Matty?”

Matty turns a red eyed face to him.

“Yeah. He was all crumpled up. No one looks good at those angles.”

His face twists at the memory. He looks as though he’s about to speak again when Jack crosses over from his and Tobias’ tent. He looks desperate.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Toby’s stopped breathing. I’m not going to try and resuscitate him.”

Abel turns and stares at him.

“He’s dead? Jack? Dear god in heaven. Fuck. We think... So is Randall.”

Jack opens his mouth and only manages a small sound of anguished despair. Matthew sighs, sounding more defeated than at any point so far.

“Fuck me. We are beyond screwed aren’t we.”

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Chapter End Notes

Greetings kind readers, my elderly papa is currently unwell so I am staying with him. I’m not going to keep up with replies but I devour comments. And yes. I’m still getting over pneumonia. However things are not as bad for me as they are for these guys. Thanks for reading. Xxx

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

CW: some description of violent death

Four of the men would feel not an iota of embarrassment if Freddie Lounds called them experts in trauma. They are. Respected in their field, well thought of, experienced, assured. Their peers might express a modicum of envy at their reputations both individually and even collectively. But this is a different kind of trauma, and although Alphas tend towards a fight response over flight or freeze, there are moments when perhaps by dint of training or exposure to the sustained grief of patients or their family or friends when the bargaining aspects of a fawning response is the dominant reply.

Abel looks round the group.

“Come on Matty. We’re not done yet. I know. I know it’s shit. But I promise you we can do this. We can.”

Matthew looks at Abel. He likes his colleague, might almost call him a friend under the right circumstances. He’s not sure these are those circumstances though. He throws Jack a look.

“I’m really sorry Jack. Fuck it. Really sorry. About Toby. Damn. And I’ve no clue what the fuck we’re going to do.”

He glances at Will who has been thinking the ramifications through, and who nods at him carefully.

“Ok. We held back something. And I’m going to tell you. Hannibal found Stammetts’ corpse. Just before you got back. I wanted to use the information to get one step ahead. I’m sorry.”

He’s sorry too about how regretful Matthew looks.

“You thought it was one of us. Oh wait. You thought it was Randall?”

Will nods briefly. It’s not quite true but it also serves a purpose in its own way.

“What I’m wondering is if Stammetts was a kind of bait?”

The others stare at him and Hannibal’s face clears.

“Oh I see. That why you thought of the wolves. You thought someone meant to attract them here?”

Will nods again as he looks round the group.

“People panic when confronted by wolves. Bears too. They both look too familiar and alien all at the same time. Right? Cuddly bears, and they’re not, and friendly dogs? And they’re really not. But a pack of wolves will divide a herd and bring down the weakest member unless they’re prepared. Whoever killed Stammetts didn’t want us to be prepared. And we’ve got weakened members.”

“You and Toby?”

Will sighs.

“They couldn’t have predicted how long Toby was going to live. And I was lucky, I didn’t die. Not for want of somebody trying though.”

Jack slumps down onto his knees in the still damp grass.

“So they’re after one of you two? Or they’re just gradually picking us off one by one?”

Matthew shakes his head.

“One by one. Or either you or Toby. It’s just so fucking crazy. And you still suspected Randall.”

Will sighs.

“I’m sorry. I did. And now? Well. We still have to try and reach him. And we have to... fuck. We have to bury Tobias. I’m so sorry Jack. But we need to. Because bears and wolves will have smelled Stammetts by now and they’re going to come looking. For Randall too. And Tobias, so we have to bury all of them. Dev didn’t say anything about him except the mycologist bit, but if he’s got family or a partner? We should do something, don’t you think?”

The others give a resigned kind of nod. And Jack lifts his head.

“What else about Stammetts? What did you have in mind?”

Will glances at Hannibal.

“If we left him here. I know. I know. But I’m kind of desperate right now. If we left him here I’d thought that if we suggested that we moved the camp we could see if anyone resisted the idea. And if anyone moved his body in response.” He sees the looks on their faces, everything from horror to outright disgust. “I know. I know. It wasn’t exactly a fantastic plan.”

Abel leans back on his hands.

“Yeah. But I see your point. If it was one of us? But how were you thinking we’d move Toby?”

He looks between Hannibal and Will, and realisation dawns on his face at the same time as the others.

“Yeah. Ok. That’s not great either. But ok. I get it. Ok. Fuck.”

Will sighs yet again.

“Look. I know. I’m sorry. But here we are now. We’ve got to bury Tobias and Stammetts and see if we can get to Randall. I’d rather not leave him for the wolves either. You know?”

The coffee pot on the edge of the fire hisses and Jack extends a hand to it, he pulls back just before grasping the handle and pulls his sleeve down over his fingers before he picks it up.

“All right. All right. God. I’m just dead on my feet. Look. We’re getting it all out into the open now. Clearing the air. That’s good. Right? There’s food isn’t there? We eat that. We talk it out, yeah? We talk it out? Try and work out what to do and how we do it? Will you’re sounding a bit better. That’s good. Abel?”

“I still don’t really want to move him. Not under his own steam. Another thirty six hours for preference.”

Wearily Matthew sighs.

“Yeah? We can carry him though. I can see we’re going to have to do that. Get everyone buried and then carry him out of here. It’s not even that far is it?”

Will shakes his head.

“Two days. I’d say less. But if you had to carry me. Two days. Maybe three at the outside. We’ve not come that far but I know it’s harder with the additional trouble of a person to get out.”

Jack rallies a little at this.

“It just feels like it’s been weeks? Yeah. Ok. Good. So. We eat. We bury Tobias and Stammetts. We look and see if we can get Randall back. And what? We eat supper. We move camp, just until we can move you further safely? Where?”

“If you can bear it I’d suggest the cave where you found Stammetts. It’s probably the area we can secure best? Keep a fire going. There’s a water seep there. I’m sorry about the blood you saw. But I think it might work out the safest.”

They can all see the truth of it, even if they don’t particularly like it.

“Yeah. Ok. Let’s eat whatever this meal is first.”

Everyone moves to collect plates and bowls and mugs and Hannibal leans closer to Will.

“You think Randall dying changes things? You are convinced it is someone outside the group?”

Will holds a ladle up in front of him and checks it.

“Nope. I still don’t know. But it will be easier to do this next bit all together and I will be as Machiavellian as I need to be to get us home safely.”

Hannibal looks at him and sees the hard truth written there. They are bonded and Will will do anything he can to protect both the bond and Hannibal. He takes Will’s bowl from him and then the ladle.

“I understand. I am perhaps too close to the group, I cannot trust some of my own instincts.”

“You doing ok? Apart from this?”

Will waves a hand around to encompass not just the space but everything that has happened over the last few days.

“Tired. Hungry. And I would dearly like a bath and a shave. And my thoughts about Tobias I have yet to parse. And Randall. I do not yet know what I think about his death. I suppose...”

“Not sunk in?”

Hannibal meets his eyes.

“I feel myself to be something of a doubting Thomas. I will not believe until I have seen.”

Will makes a horrified face.

“You think it’s not him?”

“I think I want to be certain. You are not wrong to have worried about him. And I am not entirely confident in anything except the evidence of my own eyes. I would like, very much, to be sure.”

They are slow to make inroads into the food. All of them dispirited and lost to their own thoughts and fears to a greater or lesser extent. Will too is desperately tired and his head has begun a low claiming throb that distracts and worries him. He knows he should tell Abel at least. But maybe not yet.

Shock does odd things to people. And they are all experiencing it to some degree or other. Jack retreats a little, and is also more caustic than usual. Abel is more flippant. Matthew close to something akin to despair. And Hannibal? Perhaps because of Will has become steelier and more determined. As they finish the last of the food Will makes a start on the next hard reality they must face.

“We have to dig at least three feet down. So that we can put two feet of earth on top. And then we’re going to have to do at least a foot of rock and stone. There’s enough of it here. The soil is too stony right here, but off towards the cat holes it’s softer underfoot. They built where the ground was most stable. We’ve got trowels and I’ve got one fold up shovel. There might be an old fire iron set in the outhouse. There used to be. It might be worth a check but mind the roof. Last thing we need is it coming down on anyone.”

Jack lumbers to his feet, all his bulk seeming to act like an anchor and not in a good way. No longer keeping him tethered in some safe harbour but dragging him down against the ebb, an undertow of grief and failure.

“All right. Gloves as well. Hannibal. Will you show me Stammetts? What do we need? A groundsheet? Something like that? Just to carry him?”

“Yes. And a knife.”

He realises that the others are listening.

“He was strung up. In a tree. I’m sorry. There is no easy way to tell you this. Gutted with bowels out.”

Abel and Matthew both look like they might be sick. Jack drops at the shoulders.

“Yeah. Ok. Knife as well then. Think it was an Alpha? Or did they kill him first?”

Hannibal makes a face.

“I think he was alive when they put him there. I’m sorry. There is a lot of blood.”

Jack shrugs then and it’s a good reminder that the everyday press of blood and trauma is at least nothing new to him.

“Bad is it?”

“Grim.”

“Just great. Come on then. Think we can manage him between us?”

They shift out of the clearing and Abel and Matthew follow Will’s directions to a site off to one side of the bald away from any of the buildings and near to the short path that leads only to the cat holes.

“Here? What? Two holes or one? One? Ok.”

They pace a crude rectangle out on the ground and then make a start from opposite ends, Matthew with the collapsible trenching spade Will had with him still folded up in his tent and Abel with the short handled shovel he found in the outhouse. They both wear gloves against stones and the occasional small piece of corroded metal they find.

“Had your shots Abe?”

“Always. How bout you?”

“Due for all the Heps and Tetanus so I’ll try not to impale myself. What’s this do you think?”

He holds up a piece of rusted iron and Abel smiles.

“Nails. I reckon. A clump of nails. Maybe they were in a carton or something and it rotted away.”

Matthew almost manages a smile.

“Very Indiana Jones of you.”

Abel smirks.

“Better Indy than Lara Croft or that idiot in the thing in space.”

Matthew frowns and can’t decide who he means. They carry on digging in silence whilst Will watches them from the edge of the fire. Beside him Wen makes a disgruntled noise and he wonders if she’s caught the scent of something larger out in the woods just beyond the margins of what he can readily sense.

He closes his eyes and lets himself properly see.

The gradual expansion of his senses run in a spiral out from him. There’s some of the usual small scale knowing of things that are endings or beginnings, or both, new life out of the old and decayed. Feasting and fasting, depending on who or where you are in the food chain. He can feel the copper edged grief of the group, the welled up sorrow and pain. And a thread of anger. Human emotion is always muffled. By society. Or norms. Or thoughts about what is or isn’t ok to express. Animals are easier in that respect. What they feel is what you’ve got. For better of for worse.

He can taste the bright fizz of roving wolf pack. A kind of gritted frantic lust to them. Fearful of all the humans milling round the mountain and the woods, but also circling, waiting for any opening that’s afforded to them. There might be one or two lone wolves as well. Rogues or outcasts from a pack, not necessarily the current one. One of the loners is older and more accustomed to his madness, settled in it. But the younger one? The younger one feels violent and wild and uninhibited. Will shivers. He can taste the sense of this younger wolf in the back of his throat. His hand clenches in Wen’s fur.

The sow bear is still there. Right on the edges of his knowing. Not so hungry, she must have eaten something recently, but still a little sore and testy. And to be avoided at all costs. There’s another, a male, somewhere. But not close.

He can feel the flighted leap of deer, several herds spread around the woods, picking their way through the brush. Grazing on the spring growth. White tail. Roe. Maybe one of the exotics, escaped from some farm or herd or pets that got loose somehow or were released when they became too much work. Maybe too many of them out in this neck of the woods for this fallowed year, but that’s good for the wolves and foxes and coyote. There’s no mountain lion up here. He’d know it if there were. But there’s something else. Big. Tightly furled in on itself but ready to uncurl and stretch and wreak some kind of havoc.

He tries not to concentrate. Sometimes, most of the time, it’s like that. Like the way if you try to grab at a memory that is only hovering you keep missing it, and it slips through your fingers like fine grains of sand. You have to see your way round to it. Like being able to see

round a corner that only exists in your own mind. Yeah. Something else. Something feral. And that's reasonably at home out here. There's a kind of curiosity there. Like it's interested to see what might happen.

Will opens his eyes. What might happen? What other things could happen? He looks over to the tent where he knows Tobias is cooling. To Abel and Matthew squabbling tiredly about how much and how fast to dig; he should make them a drink at least. To the empty tents full of gear which they will have to pack up and take with them. Or try to at least. He turns his head when he hears Jack and Hannibal coming back. And tries to breathe normally.

They carry Stammetts' body in a ground sheet and take him close to where Abel and Matthew are still digging, then set him down carefully leaving the tarp closed over him. Abel looks up at them from where he is kneeling.

"Bad as in grim. Or bad as in weird?"

Hannibal makes an unhappy face at him.

"I would say both." He throws a look Jack's way. "Jack?"

Jack gets down on one knee beside the covered body. He hesitates and looks at them both.

"Different to what we see on a Saturday night, ok? Not like a bottling from some drunk as fuck idiot after his team lost and he thinks someone insulted them. Ok."

He tips the sheet back and the four men stare at the body. Abel peers closer.

"That's nasty. You say the bowels were out. You push them back in? Were they severed?"

Jack shakes his head.

"It would stink even worse if he'd perforated them, so no, I don't think so. But his kidneys are both missing, and maybe his liver too. I didn't check for the rest. It's a mess. The flies and a few kinds of beetle have been at him."

They all nod. It's not so usual for them to see fly infestations on corpses. Not so often they see corpses like this at all. But they know the theory. Different insects are attracted to any kind of corpse at different rates. And to be sure freezing a body or exposing it to excessive heat can screw the math but it's nearly always possible for a forensic entomologist to have a good shot at time of death by insect activity. And cells that have been subject to a freeze and thaw show evidence of that too. Or if they've been stored in water. Or somewhere hot and dry. The body will bear a silent and regretful witness to most injuries done to it given half the chance.

From over by the fire Will asks.

"Can you tell how long he's been dead?"

Jack looks at him and then back down at Stammetts.

“Rigour’s been and gone and there’s some skin slippage. I’d say he must have been killed not long after we all went to bed. So yeah. Could have been any of us. I know I stepped out to take a leak. I bet Randall did or you did Matty. Abel? You were on your own. And for all I know Hannibal did too. You’re mostly off the hook Will. Not because I don’t think you could under normal circumstances, but because these aren’t normal circumstances.”

Will nods.

“But not more recently than that?”

Jack stares at the body again and then looks closer at Stammetts face, and then back up at Will.

“What’s on your mind?”

Will grimaces and looks between them.

“I wondered if he might have been convinced to go with whoever did this to him and they overpowered him and gagged him and tied him to the tree but killed him later when they had more time.”

Matthew gets up from beside the temporary grave.

“Two windows of time. Not one. He might even have thought they’d come back and free him? If he kept quiet. Did he think he was being got out of the way? Shit. Was he?”

“He was sleeping in a more open shelter than the tents. I don’t honestly know. Maybe whoever did it didn’t have much time or was worried about noise. I don’t know. I really don’t. I’m just asking the question.”

“I hate the fucking question.”

Jack wipes his forehead with the back of his hand.

“All right then. It makes a few hours difference. And maybe alters who had the opportunity. I don’t know. But there’s a start point when we all went to bed. And a cut off when Hannibal found him.”

Everyone looks at Hannibal who raises his eyebrows.

“He was certainly dead when I found him.”

Jack waves an apologetic hand.

“Yeah. Yeah. I know. Sorry. Look. Let’s get them into the ground. Abel give me the shovel. You go and do food or something. Maybe a drink. Hannibal? You got a trowel or whatnot?”

He flips the groundsheet back over the body of Eldon Stammetts. Three of them work on the grave site and Abel comes to the fire.

“Ok. I’ll make drinks and something to eat and then what. We bury them. And pack up?”

“Yes. We pack up. And head for the cave. Maybe in two goes. We can store things there if we have to leave anything behind. I wouldn’t trust things not to go missing here. Fewer people use that path.”

Abel nods and neither of them mention all the things that have gone missing from camp while they have all been there.

“Yeah. Jack said it looked like no one had been that way for a while. Will...” He stops and Will can see him mulling something over before he asks. “Why do you think whoever took Stammetts kept him alive? I mean. What made you wonder?”

“I wondered if they’d tortured him. You know the deer? There’s something especially sick about it.”

“In case he saw something? Or they thought he did?”

“Yes. I think so.”

“I don’t like that they took the organs.”

Will closes his eyes.

“You think he could be eating them?”

Abel sighs and doesn’t reply. He pulls some wood from the pile and begins to build a teepee fire base the way he’d leaned aeons ago back when he was an Eagle Scout. As he gradually add thicker pieces of wood he waits until they’re broader than his thumb before he shoves it sideways and sets one of the metal grids over the flames and puts a pot of water on to boil.

“What can we eat? Something heavy?”

Will nods and they prepare dirty rice and chicken using ingredients from several of the food bags. Abel checks the seal on each one then shrugs as though it’s a little like closing the stable door after the horse has bolted.

“Dried bananas and apple? Custard. I feel like I need something kind of comforting.”

“I can make crumble.”

They carry on with the food and eighty minutes later call the other three over. The five men eat both courses and Matthew and Jack eat second helpings of the pudding.

As they drink coffee and tea round the fire, sat variously on upturned logs or origami chairs Matthew pulls a handful of items from his pocket and spreads them out on a clean plate.

“Found them while we digging. Abel thinks these are nails?”

He holds up the corroded lump of metal and passes it to Will who shrugs.

“Yes. Maybe.”

“Some kind of medicine bottle, label’s not entirely gone, it’s got the word ‘patent’ still legible, that’s usually a good sign of something expensive and unpleasant. Marble. Might be from a pop bottle. My grandpa used to smash the bottles and keep the stopper. Used to get belted for it too. Didn’t stop him. He was a little shit by his own account. Old double ended spanner, bet someone was pissed when they lost that. Metal button. ‘Indian’ Penny from...” he peers at the reverse “1882. There’s a fair bit of glass fragments and bits of blue and white china. Sad really.”

No one disagrees with him.

They tidy away the items from the meal and Hannibal offers Will his hand.

“It’s deep enough. Will you come?”

Jack and Matthew go to his and Tobias’ tent and return with him wrapped in his sleeping bag and carried in another of the ubiquitous groundsheets. They lower him into the hole. For a screaming second Will wants to ask them to check that he’s really dead, but he knows it’s just wishful thinking on his part, he’d liked Tobias and his stupid Star Trek toy and silly mugs. And his partner. He tries not to think of Franklyn. Abel and Hannibal lift the ground sheet with Eldon Stammetts in and lay him carefully beside Tobias. Jack swallows hard.

“I’ve nothing to say you don’t already know. But if I find out who did this. To either of them. I promise you, they’ll regret the day they were born.”

He bends down and picks up a handful of earth and scatters it on the tarps. All of them set to covering the bodies with the recently excavated soil. It’s a faster job to fill it in. When they’re done Will explains which stones to use and where and how to cover the heaped earth. Hannibal helps him back to the fire and he sits down heavily and waits for them to finish.

It takes almost an hour to pile on all the stones even with four of them working steadily on it.

“Now we pack it all up?”

Will nods at Matthew.

“We pack it all up. Take it to the cave. And see if by any piece of luck we can get down to Randall’s body. I’m sorry we couldn’t try earlier.”

Matthew shakes his head.

“Doesn’t matter. Won’t change anything will it.”

Will can only hope that he’s right.

Chapter 25

They pull Randall and Tobias' gear into the centre of the clearing next to Stammetts' bag. And then they look disconsolately at the sad pile. Somehow its orphaned state makes it depressing, and not just terrible. Matthew adds the things they'd found of Frederick's near the shelter site, that he'd inadvertently left behind; just a sleeping mat, quilt, a mug, and a water bottle. Will thinks of the bandana he now has that also belonged to Fred. There is something bothering him about that whole story that he still can't get.

They gather all the food bags, and Will goes through them, partly to check on the seals and partly to find out if anything is missing. He calls across the clearing,

"Did you get everything from the bear safe Matthew?"

Matthew gets up from outside his tent, where he has been sorting his gear from Randall's and packing them separately, and hunkers down beside him.

"Yeah. I think so. I can check again. Just to be sure. Are we leaving the safe here?"

Will thinks of the straight pine he's always used to hang it.

"Yeah. Might as well. I can get it back another time. It's just additional weight if we carry it." He pauses as he looks at the gear. "Ok. We should also hang some of this stuff too. We can load up Randall and Toby's bags. We'll take any food and empty water bottles, and any really personal gear. I don't want to leave any meds out here either. Or electronics. So. Things like that. Ok? Oh, and their sleeping mats. We'll appreciate them in the cave especially. You good to do their's, and I'll manage Stammetts'?"

The two of them go through the three bags. When Matthew has finished Randall's bag he stops for a few minutes, a look of perplexed enquiry on his face. He gets up and goes back to his tent, and goes through his bag quickly, and then comes back to Will's side and searches Tobias'.

"Matthew?"

"It's just a bit odd. That book. The one I gave Randall. I can't find it. I thought it was just faintly possible that he'd been reading it in Tobias' tent. He had it at some point didn't he? But it's not with Toby's kit either. I'll ask Jack. Hang on."

He's a back a few moments later and shakes his head.

"He knows the book I mean, but it's not there. Do you think it matters? I mean. No one burned it on the fire did they?"

He stands and hollers at the rest of the group.

“Anyone seen that book? Blue cover? The Russian forest one. Fred had it. Then Toby. Randall too.”

There’re general indications of dissent and Will realises they probably all know the theory about what might or might not be in the notes Fred made in the back, but not what significance it’s loss might mean. It is yet another thing to worry about.

“So where is it?”

Matthew shrugs.

“I suppose it is just possible Rand had it with him when he...”

Will nods.

“Ok. Yes. I get it. We’ll have to check.”

He looks at Matthew’s tired face, still sad and drawn after what has happened.

“I am sorry Matthew. About Randall.”

“Yeah. I know. Look. I understand. And maybe I feel so shit because I was still holding on to some suspicions too. That’s not a great feeling.” He takes a long breath, holds it, and then slowly let’s it out again. “Yeah. Anyway. There’s not much from their bags.”

He picks up a fleece hat which he’d upturned and used as a bowl and shows Will the contents.

“They both brought phones, I guess habit more than anything. Maybe they had books on them? Or backup torches? Toby has...” he pauses and tries again. “Toby had this neat charger.”

He shows Will the solar charger which can be clipped to the lid of a backpack, and used as you walk along.

“I don’t know if it’s his, he got a lot of gear on a lend from Franklyn’s friend. You met him, right? Donald? Nice guy. Likes the whole outdoor gig.”

He fiddles with the charger, and bites the corner of his lip.

“You’re taking him on some challenge? He mentioned it at the leaving thing. 5 Cs? That right? I’d be interested too. I know this hasn’t exactly been the best introduction...” He frowns. “.. Yeah. But I can see why it gets to people. You’re not going to give up are you?”

Will shakes his head. It hadn’t quite occurred to him. But he can see why Matthew might ask. This has been his life though, for too long, and has been too hard won just to let it all go. The hit his reputation takes through what’s happened though? He swallows against the thought. He’s practically holding Toby’s personal gear and he’s worried about his reputation as a guide. He recognises the inevitability of the thought though, as it worms its way into his consciousness. When they get back there will be all kinds of questions, and investigations.

Maybe wrongful death suits. It's why he has insurance after all, just in case of injury or accident or disgruntled clients. He's never had to use it, but he keeps the premiums up each month. And now he's thinking about that. Just for a few moments he can't help but loathe himself for it.

"It's not your fault."

Will looks at Matthew. He still looks tired and sad and drawn, but there's kindness there too.

"I keep trying to tell myself that. Hard not to feel responsible, in some way at least. I know. Really. I do."

They both look over to where Jack is folding down the skin of the tent into its stuff sack. He packs it into his rucksack, then closes the drawstring and clips the lid in place. He looks back at them. Then he makes a small regretful face. They're all feeling it.

Will holds out his hand for the fleece hat; along with the phones and the charger, there are two head torches, some painkillers, and an engraved lighter. It's initialled, but doesn't seem to be either Tobias' or Randall's. He holds it up to Matthew.

"You think he found it? Whose bag was it in? Or is it a family thing?"

"It was in Randall's bag. I don't know. Could be either I guess, he didn't mention it if he did find it. I'd guess family. Or a friend. But it's silver so someone might care."

Will hands him the lighter.

"You hang onto it. He's got family, right? We should get it back to them. Find out who it belongs to. I think it would come better from you."

Matthew tucks it into the breast pocket of the flannel shirt he's wearing, and does the button up to keep it secure. He pats it, and then rolls his eyes at himself.

"Got it. Will you take the phones?"

Slowly, one by one, the rest of the group brings their backpacks to the fire. Hannibal brings Will's. Even though all the packs are all almost full there is a dispiriting amount of assorted kit left over.

Will looks through the heap of gear and food.

"Ok. So we sort out the food. But I think we have to face it. We're looking at two trips to the cave. We're going to hang Randall and Toby's bags, so we won't have to bring them. Stammetts' too. But I don't think we can manage me, and my bag, plus the extra food, and what's left of the gear. It's not ideal to leave their bags, but we've taken the valuables and meds. Matt's got the personal stuff. I've got the phones and meds. And, I know you've seen that pile. We're taking their mats for sure, because the cave is much harder on your hips and shoulders than the grass is. Fred left his so it means we've got an extra four. It'll be annoying now. But tonight we will all be glad."

He wipes a hand across his face, aware that he's perspiring slightly and a wave of nausea flits across him. If it goes on like this he'll have to 'fess up to Abel. He muscles through it, hoping it's not too obvious. He doesn't look at Abel or Hannibal, though he suspects that the latter's antennae are quivering. Yeah. That's going so well. He can see him hovering out of the corner of his eye.

"Ok. So. Hard talk about the tents. We can make a larger shelter out of all the ones you've all been using so that the three of you can share a single space. It would mean no one gets left on their own."

He watches that sink in.

"Or, if you prefer, you can each have a tent to yourself. There's enough now. You don't have to decide right this moment because we'll spend tonight in the cave, and maybe tomorrow too, depending on how it goes with getting Randall back, and depending on whether I can mostly walk by then. But give it some thought. There's some merit in each person carrying both parts for a single shelter. And I'm sorry but you'll need to carry the two extra poles per tent. Abel, you should have still got Fred's? As well as the bathtub? Good. Thanks."

There is a certain amount of resigned sighing at yet more difficulties. And then a slow coalescing of activity. Jack, weighed down by the snowballing events tries to rally himself. It's clear to all his colleagues that it's hard. But there are good reasons why he's the team lead and he wouldn't be if he couldn't step up into a crisis.

It's one of their problems Will realises. They all have the ability to step up, but every time they do they're getting knocked back. And not in a manageable or predictable way. None of this makes sense, the edges are jagged and don't fit as you might expect them to. It's an incomplete jigsaw with some of the pieces missing and which has clearly been stored in the wrong box. It's this he realises that's throwing them off so badly, the image on the front doesn't even begin to match what's inside the box. It's the closest metaphor he can get to, to explain what people encounter in the woods when this kind of reality hits.

It's darker in the woods than people realise. It's much messier. Much harder. Sure, there are the moments of clear headed joy, the whole afternoons of successful walks up a stiff incline, the evenings when the fire lights, and there is good food, and the water seep didn't run dry.

But, as they have all realised, everyone brings themselves to the woods. And people are dark. Messy. Hard. He shakes himself. Of course they're those things. And hasn't he encountered enough of that over the years? You don't get to be a male omega with a male omega parent without that happening. But people are also kind. Compassionate. A goddam screaming delight. They're all trying out here. And it's not easy.

"Guys. The other thing? I get that none of you signed up for this. This has gone bad faster than I would have believed. All the wardens round here, all the trip leaders, everyone local? We've all got stories. Hard core. And sure, some of it is jam to make a group or class feel good about that they've achieved. But some of it is as close to true as a story teller can manage. This..?"

He gestures around them.

“This is shit. This is the kind of bad that guides pray never happens to them. That we all talk about quietly. You know? Kinda suck our teeth, and make a face, and change the subject, in case it brings bad luck or something worse. I’m sorry that you are now face on to an epic amount of crap. I told Hannibal I’d talk this through with all of you. No one will come looking for us for another six days or so. If we don’t show up Sunday when I said we would that’s when things will crank into gear. For now though? For now. It’s just us.”

The group shift slightly.

“Ok. It’s not just us. That’s the shit bit. But it’s just us to get ourselves back.”

Jack holds up a hand.

“This is a re-group isn’t it? Ok. Yeah. Fair enough. You don’t want to wait until the cave?”

Will glances at Hannibal.

“I feel a bit sick. So I want to lay the plan out right now. Just in case. We stay in the cave tonight, maybe tomorrow night too. If we can get to Randall tomorrow, we do it. I think we’ll lose the light tonight, but we’ll see. If we get to him tomorrow, we bury him, and we walk out the day after. That’s Wednesday. I can’t see it being before Wednesday. It will take us two days to get back. At least. I’m sorry. We have to take a certain amount of gear with us just for safety’s sake. So. We should make it back by Friday. Maybe Saturday.”

There are slow nods around the group. Abel raises a hand.

“We’re just going to follow the route back that we came out on?”

“Yes. Normally I’d do a big loop, bring us back to the cabin by a different trail. But, right now, I think it’s safest to just head back in. And if I can’t manage it, I think between you, you’d know the way?”

Abel nods.

“Yeah. I looked at the map with Randall. I think I could take us round either trail if I had to. That bit when Jack and I thought you’d all abandoned us made me take a good hard look at it.”

Will breathes a little easier. Good. At least one other person then.

“Follow the flashes. And from here it’s pretty well downhill.”

He pauses.

“I’ve still got the map with the land marked on it. It’s not so good for navigating which is why it wasn’t with the others, but it means whoever took the compasses and maps missed it.”

There’s a moment of quiet then. The maps and phone are a stark reminder that what has happened had been down to someone in the group. Or someone trailing them. It’s hard to see the bulk of what’s occurred as just a series of unfortunate coincidences. Even if it would

make them feel better. Nothing explains Stammetts. Or the deer. Will has a lurking feeling in his gut that the deer means something. Maybe when they get to the cave they can try and excavate that bit of of the conundrum.

.....
It does not prove easy to get all of them and all their gear to the cave. It's not that far, it's just that fear and too much stress takes its toll. There are a few ruffled feathers and disgruntled arguments. If he were doing a group dynamics analysis, he might say they've got to the storming part of the group's formation. Carrying Will, it turns out, is the least of their problems.

"We use one of the mat chairs. They're designed to do this in a push. I'm not sure how well one would stand up to a really large Alpha, but some titch like me? No problem. The handles on either side? We can use those, or see these loops? We thread two poles through. It means it takes four rather than two to carry the person. More like a sedan chair. Maybe a bit easier on the trail. I've had kids do races with these all the time."

They opt for the four person version, and have to work out how to manage their differing heights and arm lengths. But, along with Will, they manage their own backpacks as well on the first run.

At the cave Matthew shows Will the scuffle marks in the dry sand of the cave entrance, and the blood at the edge of the escarpment. The other three are busy with the gear and agreeing who will go back for the second run as Will and Matthew talk it through.

"Definitely a fight, don't you think? More than one set of shoe prints here. See?"

Will leans over from his sitting position while Matthew squats on the other side. He sees where Matthew is pointing.

"Here. This is one boot. Newish, the tread is relatively even. Vibram sole. You can see the trade mark. These are the Keen boots that Randall was wearing. Here. And here. It's too scuffed to be really sure, but maybe another set. An older pair."

He makes a face.

"Most of you have got newish boots. The problem with these marks is the overlays. The most recent tracks should be over the older ones? But this is a mess. Did either of you walk over this?"

Matthew rubs his face.

"Shit. I suppose. We might have done. And I've got vibrams. I guess some of the others do too. So these are useless."

Will peers harder.

"I'm not sure. I don't think they're useless. They tell us something. And there's blood too. Did you do anything about blood spatter in med school?"

“Blood spatter?” Matthew shakes his head again. “In med school. Only as it pertains to operating, and when we have to pass on evidence in a police thing. But generally? No. Not a thing. I guess we’ve all seen movies or shows.”

He trails off.

“Why?”

Will points to two different areas of the prints.

“This is a teardrop shape. You see? The blood drop? It means it’s a directional hit. Whatever cast it was moving sideways. This here... this is round. It means it just dripped downwards. The thing that cast it wasn’t moving. In any fight where there’s bloodshed the first hit is free. The weapon, or fist or boot or whatever, has no blood on it so you get no directional drops. But you do afterwards. It’s how blood evidence guys reconstruct what happened in a fight. You know. He said. She said. Utterly unreliable. Eye witness testimony is crap. Blood evidence though? Doesn’t lie.”

Matthew looks again.

“So. Ok. I get you. This means this swung like this. And this, like that. And this. Not at all. Ok. I see. And that means this is a mess.”

Will nods at him slowly.

“It is a mess. And we’ve no way of telling if this is Randall’s blood or whoever attacked him.”

Matthew looks to the edge of the precipice.

“Ok. Lemme grab one of the others. We’ve still got to get the other gear back and get down to him. How much light have we got? An hour?”

“90 minutes and then we’ll start to lose definition.”

“Ok. So we’ve time to get the rest of the gear and make a try.”

He turns into the depths of the cave, and raises his voice.

“Guys? Got to try and see about Randall. There’s four of us. Two for the run back to the top for the last bag and the other gear? Two to stay here and make a fire, and set up, and take a look for a way down? Will’s got some ideas about the marks that were left.”

He turns back to Will again.

“Didn’t occur to me but some of this blood could even be Stammetts? From before. We didn’t even look for that kind of thing. We were just glad we found him. And he was pretty out of it.”

Will explains about the blood and the tracks to the group. No one though is any the wiser, or can come up with any kind of coherent explanation. Fight? Fall? It's impossible to say without information that they simply don't have.

Although reluctant to leave Will, they eventually agree Hannibal and Abel will go back to the camp for the second load. Wen perks up an ear and follows Hannibal when they leave, and for once Will doesn't regret her defection. Jack and Matthew stay at the cave.

"Ok. So. What? I sit on your legs and you try not to give me a heart attack by falling over the goddam cliff as well?"

Matthew huffs a small laugh.

"He might still have been pushed you know. Or a fight."

"Yeah. Any of those. Both. I don't know. Shit even my boots have those goddam diamonds on the bottom."

He lifts his foot as he says it, as if there could be some doubt about it. And there's the distinctive yellow diamond.

"All right then. Let's try. How'd you do this before?"

Matthew goes near the edge and lies flat, and then wiggles closer to it, using his elbows to pull him along.

" Ok. So just, lean on my legs, back of my knees. And when I get a bit further over the edge, lean a bit harder. Yeah? Ok? Got it? Don't let go?"

Jack mutters back at him.

"Yeah? No shit."

Matthew manages the feat without scaring himself or Jack witless, and Jack manages not to let go. When they're done, Matthew dusts himself down and makes a face.

"Nothing's changed. He's still fucking lying there. At least there's no sign of any wildlife. God. This is shit. And I've got no idea at all about how to get down there. Will?"

From his origami seat Will points to the opposite path to the one they all took to reach the cave site.

"So we came up from the other direction. But if you go along there, about ten minutes or so, there is a path. It's not great. And it's vulnerable to slip. Too much rain isn't great. Or, If it's been too dry. Plant encroachment. But I've used it pretty successfully half a dozen times, more probably, but not with Wen. I'm sure she'd be fine, but I'd have a conniption fit worrying about her. But you need both hands free, and a good head for heights."

"And that's the only way down?"

“No. But it is the nearest and probably the fastest by a considerable chunk of time. We can go back the way we got here. There’s a trail off the one we used. It’d take about half a day to get there. Maybe a bit less. But you have to get over the river. And I’m not sure how bad the storm will have affected it. And there’s a third option. Instead of diverting off the path ten minutes down that trail, you keep going. Eventually there’s another trail that leads off it. It’s a much longer way round but it doesn't cross the river. The river doubles back in what’s basically an oxbow. But that would take at least a day. Matthew?”

Matthew shakes his head regretfully and looks at Jack. He holds his hands up.

“Matthew. You gotta do what you gotta do. I get it. He’s your friend. What are you thinking?”

Matthew squats down again beside Will, and Jack comes and joins them.

“Ok. If Will is ok and tells me what to do, I can get the cave set up. The guys will be back reasonably soon. How much light have we got left?”

Will holds his hand up palm flat and facing him.

“The sun will start to set in twenty minutes. It’s the distance between the bottom edge of the sun and the horizon that tells you. If you put your hand up. Like this. Yeah? Each finger is equivalent to about five minutes. So. All four fingers? Twenty minutes. I’m approximating because of the trees. But give or take.”

Matthew draws something mindlessly in the dirt.

“You don’t think I can get down there in the time? Damn. I can see you don’t. How bad would it be in the dusk. Yeah. Ok. That’s a bad idea too. Fuck, I really hate this.”

“I’m sorry. I think we have to wait for the light. Tomorrow. I don’t want you to risk it. I can’t speak for him, so I won’t even try. But for me, for us, I’d rather you didn’t. But. I know it’s hard.”

The three of them sit without passing further comment until Matthew stands.

“All right then. Fuck. Let’s get the camp set up properly. Water? Get the fire going? Do we need to cover the frontal the cave at all?”

Will nods at him. It’s good thinking, especially if it rains in the night.

“We don’t need to cover the whole thing, but we can do several things. Set up rain breaks. So they overlap, means we can get in and out easily but the rain can’t. Or set up the four tents as a single shelter. It will keep us warmer, and if it rains it will stop the wind driving the rain in.”

“And the fire?”

“Just outside the cave entrance. We don’t want it inside because of oxygen and because of sparks. But there’s another reason. A fire will keep away the various nocturnal animals we’re keen on avoiding. People think fires attract animals. But usually it’s a warning that there are

unpredictable humans near by, and it means that most will stay well away. Not just because of us. No animal likes fire, unless they've been trained to it. For the obvious reason. It's not safe."

"Even bears and wolves?"

"If they were really, really desperate? I wouldn't want to test it out, if I'm honest. Particularly a bear. An angry bear? Nope. But just an ordinary grumbly bear? And a wolf pack that isn't too stressed by the environment? It should hold them. But I'm talking a decent sized fire not some tiny stove."

Jack nods.

"Ok then. We set up the shelter, shift everyone's stuff inside. And then get the fire sorted out. Damn. I don't think I can face food. Did we eat? We ate? Didn't we? More than once. Today. I think."

They make a start, and when the other two men return, all but Will work on setting up the site.

There's only desultory conversation, everyone too strained from the events of the day for anything more. Matthew explains about Randall and about the three trails and the one he'll try in the morning. While they're all clearing up, Abel sits down beside Will.

"How are you doing now. You looked sick earlier. Coming and going?"

Will carries on with the drying up of plates and bowls he's doing. Something at least that he can manage from his seat, upwind of the fire.

"It's not bad now. Just comes in waves. It's a bit shit. But there's no swelling."

He tips his head as Abel raises a hand, and carefully feels along the lower half of Will's skull.

"Ok. Still ok. We'll take it carefully tomorrow, concentrate on reaching Randall, and then look at how we're going to get out. I still want to be a bit cautious. Sound ok?"

"I think so. We're just doing the thing in front of us. What's that thing? No plan of campaign survives the first encounter with the enemy? We just have to keep rolling. Decide on a new plan. As and when we need it."

Abel nods at him.

"Yeah. Ok. Be responsive. I guess we keep trying to get ahead of it. But maybe it's easier to deal with anything that arises. I don't know. I'm out of my depth. But I can get us back, if you're too unwell to navigate us out. I'm pretty sure I can do it."

"Ok. That's good. I can give you the land plan map too. In the morning. Ok?"

.....

During the night Will is glad they decided on the shelter, at the entrance to the cave, as the rain picks up. It's not anywhere near the magnitude of the storm from a few nights ago, but it's heavy enough for him to mentally rule out the second trail down to where Randall is lying.

...

He wakes later in the night. The rain has stopped, but he can hear wolves. It's hard to tell from which direction. The sound is such that he suspects it's scouts from a pack, calling the rest in. It could be anything though. The graves up on Rust Peak? The blood dumped out from Stammetts by his killer? Even Randall. He makes a face. That's not a great thought. He hopes, for all their sakes, that the wolves haven't found him. Nevertheless, despite this thought circling his mind, he goes back to sleep.

.....

Sometime in the early hours, just as the light is beginning to turn things from grey to a subtle green, he wakes for a third time. This time because he feels ill. He sits up for a few minutes. Mainly to see if it will pass, or if he must wake someone.

Hannibal shifts so that he is lying on his side to face him.

"Abel says you have not felt so well today? Before or after we moved you?"

"Ahh. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you. I'm ok, a bit shit this morning. Headache mainly. I couldn't tell if it was the concussion, or a touch of dehydration, or just the stress of it all. He says we should keep an eye on it. See if I throw up. There's a touch of nausea but nothing major. Yeah. I can imagine your face, I won't be a hero about it either. And I'm going to talk about the route back in more detail with everyone tomorrow morning. If tonight's rain has caused the river to rise, or the melt has come down, there's just one bit that might be tricky. There're a couple of alternatives, I just want to be thorough. It'll be good if everyone knows. Especially if I'm not quite with it."

Hannibal leans up and closes the space between them, and kisses Will. When he pulls back they look at each other in the almost dark of the cave. Will studies his face, and a penny drops, and then leans across, and tips Hannibal's jaw so he can whisper right into his ear.

"I think, considering everything, it's just possible I might be pregnant."

.....

Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Shit keeps getting realer.

(So do the typos - good luck. I'll fix them at some point. Like, when it's not half past one in the morning.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A landed fish, wordlessly opening and closing its mouth, glubbing, as it turns out, is quite a good look on Hannibal. For a few moments, all he can do is stare at Will.

"A child?"

"Shhh. Maybe. I think so. I know it's way too soon to know for sure. But. But there's something."

Hannibal tucks his head into the crook of Will's neck and murmurs,

"I cannot scent it, but I would not expect to. Not yet. Maybe later, even as a non-secretor."

Will tips his head back and Hannibal lays his lips against the bonding mark and rests there.

"Perfect."

He kisses him there and then pulls his head back.

"Shall we say nothing?"

"Nothing. Not yet. It's much too soon. And honestly? After today…" He trails off for a moment, his thoughts as scattered as the last 24 hours - 48 hours, longer - have been. "Yeah. Well, we still don't know what the deal is here."

Hannibal nods soberly.

"We will leave as soon as we can. I know Abel is still concerned about the concussion, and I admit I am loathe to go against his judgement." He pauses and Will watches him purse his lips together in a line as tight as one belonging to a fisherman that's finally hooked his dinner. "But I think we might try tomorrow."

“Weighing up the risks?”

“One is more quantifiable than the other. You have shown no symptoms from the head injury other than the nausea. And if we have an alternative explanation? I still want to be careful. But, it may be far more dangerous to stay than for us to go.” He doesn’t delineate all the things that are piling up, an extra burden they are carrying through the woods, even in the quiet dark and relative safety of the cave.

“Ok. Yeah. I see that. I think I’m still trying to somehow make myself believe this is all a series of things which are just bad luck and poor timing.”

Hannibal examines his face closely. It is not so surprising. Easier to think like that. Bad luck and poor timing. Easier and safer. More hopeful. Of the two of them he wonders which of them is the more inclined to optimism. They are both practical men, pragmatic even. Perhaps optimism is too strong a word for it. Just hopeful then, maybe. Neither of them yet tainted by despair. He looks at Will looking back at him, the same intense scrutiny and interest he brings to so many things. Slowly, they both smile.

“You should try and sleep some more. However it turns out, I am predisposed to suppose it will be an arduous day.”

Will nods, noticing with some relief that the wave of nausea has receded. Maybe he can get another hour or so.

He settles down on his and Fred’s mats. Grateful for his forethought, for the trouble they took and for the warmth and added thickness of the extra layer. Hannibal turns on to his side behind him. Close, but not touching. A bulwark against trouble and grief. It’s Will’s last articulated thought before he slides into sleep.

Hannibal is awake for considerably longer, in part because of the possibility of a child, of course that, he thinks to himself, of course, and feels a surge of resentment that anything should distract him and Will from that, but he is realistic - on an operating table you deal with what is rather than the if onlys. He stares at Will’s back, visible now in the grey light and concentrates. If asked, he would say he was thinking his way through what has occurred, the way any good surgeon might do after an operation. Especially one that has been difficult or didn’t go as planned. He jostles his thoughts around, tries to consider things from a range of angles. He settles deeper into his sleeping bag. The surgical analogy only goes so far, there is a lot that cannot be jigsawed together. Things that don’t add up. He supposes they make sense to the killer. He hopes they do. Surely they do. Because otherwise, that would mean… He realises he has lost another train of thought, everything catching up with him. As he’s drifting off into his own dawn-break sleep it occurs to him it would make more sense if there were more than one person involved. More than one killer. Not necessarily connected to each other.

……

In his and Tobias’ apartment, Franklyn hovers over the bowl of the toilet in their small en-suite bathroom. He wipes a clammy hand over his face and reaches for a face cloth. When it’s damp with warm water he wipes his face and neck. God. What did he eat? It feels like his

entire gut is being twisted, and like someone reached up to his heart and squeezed. He presses the back of his hand to his forehead. Maybe a bit of fever too. Dammit all to heck, he'll have to call in sick in the morning, food poisoning is the pits.

He makes it back to the bedroom and lowers himself, carefully onto his side of the bed. If he still feels like shit when he wakes up, he'll ring Donald. Get him to bring round a little takeout chicken soup. Or something. From that nice place near the College. Or that deli beside the bookshop round behind… A band tightens around his ribs and he snags a pillow from Tobias' side of the bed and hugs it. Ugh. Never mind the soup. He counts the days until Tobias is due home. At least he should be over it by then. The band tightens and he dumps the pillow on the floor as he lurches back to the bathroom to begin his vigil beside the toilet again. Yes. Saturday. It'll be done by then. Surely.

……...

When Hannibal wakes the remains of the group are gathered in the mouth of the cave over a fire that already has embers at its edges. He wonders how long they have let him sleep in. When he finds a cup of cold coffee beside his makeshift pillow, he has a clearer picture of just how tired he must have been to sleep through the start of the day. Rising to lean on one elbow he surveys the group. Tiredness seams their faces and the curl of their shoulders, hunched as they are over their various cups, bowls and plates.

Will has made bacon and eggs, and Hannibal tries to recall how it is that they have any decent food left to eat. The low murmur of conversation reaches him, the sound of the men's voices like water tumbling stones already rounded by time. Coffee would be welcome and he's glad when Jack notices he's finally rejoined the land of the waking world and brings over an enamel cup full of something that has the smell of darkness and dreams swirling its depths.

He doesn't recognise the blue mug, and Jack doesn't say who it belonged to. Hannibal answers Jack's rough, "Here, you look like you need it", with an answering grunt. Jack huffs, in turn, and slopes back to the fire where he sinks into a squat beside the fire, one hand in Wen's coat, the other snagging up another mug. Will turns then and smiles a brief, brilliant, grin in Hannibal's direction and Hannibal is suddenly reminded of the night's conversation. He ignores the scald of the coffee in his throat, the pain only serving to sharpen his keen desire for safety and home. He will get them back, he must.

……

Devin kicks earth over the remains of the fire and then hoists his pack over his shoulder. "Good to go, Larry?" His colleague takes a final look round their campsite, checking for any stray litter or sparks. He tightens his own belt, and looks again, turning a full circle and looking up as well as down. Folk hang things in trees all the time, but people looking usually concentrate on the ground. All the same there's nothing to find, up high or down low. "Yup." He nods, both of them disappointed that the fire they found still smoldering the previous evening had been the only evidence that someone else had set up camp round here in the last day or so.

There had been nothing to suggest it was their missing mycologist either, they just both hoped it might be, and that they'd find something to back up that hope. Truth be told, if Will's group haven't found Stammetts, and neither have the Hobbs, then things are looking increasingly sketchy for his future prospects.

Long habit, or some kind of sixth sense, mean they both pause on the edge of the clearing, listening to the silence that deepens with the darkness of the woods. Even though much of the canopy here is a mix of deciduous trees in varying stages of undress and the dense needles of evergreens, the spring is coming towards them in a rush of vibrant green, filling in the gaps, blocking out the light, netting the sun. In a month's time the cover will be full, and walking these paths will be like walking through a kelp forest in a shaded sea of viridian and emerald.

Laurence tips his head to one side, "Wolf," he says, "Scouting. Rust Peak way." Devin nods. "For sure. Maybe one of Will's guys. Not so careful with a meal, or a knife. Drawing it in." "Not like Will, though." Laurence says. "Nope. Not like him at all. Maybe all this…" he waves his hand. "Sure," his colleague says. "Could get anyone turned around." They pause again, listening to the lone wolf, howl, and then make a face at one another when another wolf answers it. Somewhere, between their position and the lonely point of Rust Peak, that they know is just behind the dark and light, a few miles away, a pack is turning.

"One more day and night then we head back in?" Laurence says. It's more of a statement than a question, but Devin answers him anyway. "Sure. Then we head back in." The wolves litany a call and response one more time as the men head out along another trail into the beckoning day.

…….

When Hannibal joins the semi-circle round the fire he accepts the plate of food with a grateful leer. He's hungrier than he knew, and sets on the bacon, eggs and hash browns with determination. He doesn't sit, just eats, standing up, with the plate clutched in one hand and his fork in the other. He doesn't quite shovel it in, but it's close and he doesn't slow until he catches Abel's sardonic glance. "Hungry much, Alpha?" Hannibal shrugs and wipes the last of the yolk with the last of the potato. As he swallows he nods, and then gladly exchanges the empty plate for another mug of scalding coffee. "Thank you." He manages. He remembers the plus-meds and fishes the bottle out of the zipped pocket of his pants, swallows one and then bends and hands the bottle, wordlessly to Will. "Better." He says.

The remnants of the group sit back down on the ground and Jack immediately begins on the re-group.

"Matt? You still fixed on checking out Randall? Yeah. No need to say anything. I can see you are. Will? How about the rain?"

Will gestures out over the edge of the cliff face, "I mentioned three routes down to that ledge yesterday. At least one will be impassable now, because of the river, the scrape down the hill will be no fun but might be doable, though I'd take rope just to be sure. The last one, the longest one, is probably the viable one, but the timing?" He holds out his hand and rocks it from side to side. The timing is shit and they all know it. "Almost a day there? The same back? And that's pushing it some. And only if there's no trouble on the way. But…" He holds

up a hand, as if anticipating Matthew's imminent interruption. "I think we should try. It means…" he takes a deep breath, "it means, even if Matt leaves right now, gets there before this evening, buries Randall, camps out and then with any luck, get back to us sometime tomorrow," he pauses again, "Well, you can do the math too. It means we won't start back until Thursday morning." "But if I can get down the slope? I could go on from there? Or even if I come back this way, I could catch you up?"

The group look at him as one. Chin slightly in the air, flexing his fists at his side. Will nods his head slowly. "Ok. I hadn't considered that option. If you get down the slope, you can carry on from there, though the river is a problem for all of us, ok, yeah, I can show you on the land map, there are blazes down there too. We could wait for you at the river. Or. If you come back up, you'd probably catch us up before the end of the day. We would still wait for you at the river, or you wait for us." "Crissakes, Matty, no heroics though? Ok. Beyond the basics." Jack claps him on the shoulder and it looks like it's all agreed.

Abel coughs. "I love how you're all assuming that I am a-ok with this plan. Excuse me, Dr Mr Patient Sir." Will flushes under his scrutiny and mumbles something about being much better today. "Think I'll be the judge of that. Thanks." Abel says.

The others step away while Abel goes about his routine and Matt begins packing his gear into his pack. One way or the other, he at least will be moving today.

It is only a few minutes later they hear a lone wolf howl somewhere on the peak above them. They all stop what they're doing, paying attention. When there's another call and an answering howl Matt begins to stow his belongings faster. Snagging a second mat and some of Randall's personal gear.

…….

Donald Sutherland rests the phone back in its cradle on the credenza in his hallway. It's an old fashioned thing, Bakelite, with a rotary dial. It's a bitch if you get an international number wrong and you have to start over, but the inners are all modern, it's just the casing that's old. Somehow, it feels pertinent to his life and his ongoing quest to reinvent himself in his semi-retirement, a well preserved casing though the inner workings are new.

Back in his kitchen he stares at the map that he's had pinned up on the cork board there for the best part of six months. He traces his finger up the section of the Appalachian trail he's interested in. The part he's already walked he's shaded in with a white pencil. He snags the same pencil off the side and traces the route that Tobias and the guide said they were going to take. Then he looks at it some more. On the phone, Franklyn had sounded desperate.

He unpins the map and folds it into a plastic cover and then assembles his kit. He loaned some of his better gear to Tobias, but he's still got plenty, even if it's slightly older, slightly heavier, not quite so snazzy.

He checks the gas on the stove before he leaves the house, and refuels his old Impala on the way to Franklyn and Tobias' place.

……..

Hannibal realises he has never seen his colleague quite so cross until Abel actually stamps his foot. Never has he encountered someone actually putting their foot down, quite so emphatically, until now. “No.” Abel says again. “Not yet.”

Will doesn’t protest, though there is a stubborn cast to his face neither Abel or Hannibal choose to test further.

“I’m sorry. Another 24 hours. Tomorrow. It’s the swelling at the back, under the ear. Ideally, I’d like him lifted out, not jostled down the hill between us. And even then we have to wait for Matt to get back.”

Jack sighs, and screws himself into his origami seat once more, as if resigned to yet another complicated delay. “Bitch, this shouldn’t be so hard.” He might be heard to say.

Matt shrugs. “Ok. So. I go. I come back. Then we all go. Tomorrow?”

“Actually,” Abel says slowly. “I should come with you. So you’re not alone. I could carry on though. Get someone to meet us on the way?”

Jack sighs again. As if knowing this is yet another turn that will take an hour to unscrew. He thinks of some tricky hours in the operating theatre. Nothing, he decides, was ever as bad as this.

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It isn’t quite that bad as a triple bypass with a hurricane warning going off in his ear, which is something Jack once had to endure. In the end Matthew goes alone, having made the case that he’d be far quicker on his own both there, and, especially, on the way back. No one had been able to gainsay him.

The send off is oddly formal, “Use your whistle,” Will reminds him. “If you’re in trouble, or lost, or anything. Don’t muck around.” “Good luck.” Abel says, earnestly lumping his hand. “No heroics.” Jack reminds him. “Ok? Nothing stupid.” Hannibal just nods, and Matt manages a smile in return.

He waves airily, without turning to look at them, and then rounds the corner of the path and vanishes from their sight. One of the wolves howls again. It feels closer. For the first time, Wen whines and Will runs his hand along her neck as her shackles rise. “Alright, girl. Alright. He’ll be ok. We’ll be alright.” When she whines again, he wonders if she knows he doesn’t quite believe it either.

Abel and Hannibal go to collect wood. Jack tidies the cave and the site, bitching as he gathers stray items - a sock, a lanyard, a notebook and pen, a hat, a single glove - he drops each item as he finds it beside Will, who flips idly through the notebook. Abel’s name is stenciled in the front. It reminds him that they still haven’t found the paperback book with Fred’s mysterious notes in the endpapers, and that he forgot to remind Matt to look for it on Randall’s body, too. It reminds him as well that he has Fred’s bandana in his pack. The one that Stammetts found at the water seep. He squints at Abel’s notebook, trying to catch whatever thought it was he’d had about the bandana the previous day.

He voices it aloud. “Jack? Fred’s bandana? Stammetts had it. Said he found it at the water seep.” Jack stops what he’s doing, straightening the woodpile, and joins Will by the fire. “Ok. And. You know what Fred’s like? Well. Ok. Not exactly know. But. Fred’s like that. Forgetful. Misplaces things.” He stops for a moment and then rubs a hand over his face. It’s a familiar gesture Will has seen him make before. He wonders if he remembers not to in surgery. “Actually? That’s not fair. Fred’s pretty good. He just…” he shrugs. “Ok. What are you thinking?”

“Fred had the bandana the day we arrived at the shelter building site. When he hurt his ankle. So, if he lost it, it had to be on his walk back down and Stammetts found it somewhere else. Or, if Stammetts found it at the seep…” he trails off. “Ok. That’s not it. Stammetts said there wasn’t a rope there, at the rockface near there. But Randall said there was. That suggests Stammetts was there first and someone put the rope up after, so Randall and Fred found it. But how did Stammetts find the bandana, if Fred and Randall hadn’t been past?” Jack nods slowly. “Or, Randall and Fred went that way, and there was a rope and Fred dropped his bandana. They meet your friends the Hobbs, Randall comes back that way, uses the rope, but misses the bandana. Maybe doesn’t go back to the seep.” “But?” Asks Will. “Means someone took the rope after he passed, but before Stammetts got there.” “And neither Randall or Stammetts saw anyone else?” “No. Or didn’t say so. Shit. I don’t know. Maybe Stammetts found it somewhere else. He was pretty out of it.” Will let’s out a long breath, “I uses so.” Jack shakes his head and picks up the coffee pot. “Why’s it bothering you?”

“I’m just wondering about Fred.”

Jack turns to look at him properly. “Ahh. Shit.” He says.

……..

Abigail Hobbs barrels into the kitchen and then slows right down when she sees who's there at the table with her mom.

“Hey, Donald, Dr F. Hey. Mrs. Crawford.”

The three people smile at her. Weakly. Dr F, looks like garbage and both Mrs Crawford and her dad’s client look pretty upset too.

“Abby? Put the kettle on, baby? Ok?”

She nods and swivels on the heel of her sock to collect the teakettle and set it on the front burner of the stove. Normally her mom would have something to say about wearing out the wool, but she knows something bad is going down when her mom just murmurs something to them about her dad being back soon.

She makes tea for everyone and doesn’t have to be asked to get out some cookies and a plate, and to fetch a jug for the milk or a bowl of sugar and some teaspoons.

She sits off to one side, once all the adults have the drinks to their taste and have either accepted or refused a cookie or two at her urging. It isn’t often she’s been exposed to real adult grief - when her grandma died, though she’d been real old, and had said she was ready

to go, and when Will's dad had died. She'd seen Will cry at the funeral and it had left her feeling uncertain and shaky. Even her own dad had wiped his eyes. She wishes he was here right now. Instead, there's just the hiss and click of the kettle as it cools. The kitchen clock, ticking too loud. The sound of the wind in the hickory outside the back window, it's leaves just coming in a squeaky green.

She just about keeps her seat when the truck draws up outside and she hears the engine cut out.

Her dad's inside a few minutes later and he takes one look at the gathering at the table, pulls up a chair, flicks a glance her way which she interprets as make me a drink and keep quiet.

Her dad's presence fills the room, in a good way, a certain way, a confident keep you safe in all kinds of shit way. At least, that's how Abigail feels it.

"Alright." Garrett says. "You don't have to say anything, somebody's died."

……...

The woodpile is high enough to last them another day, even if they have to build it higher in the night to keep any roving wolves at bay. Hannibal persuades Abel to hold onto him as he takes a look over the edge of the escarpment. Below him, he can still see Randall's body lying in a heap, at the bottom of the cliff face. There is still no sign of Matthew. He shuffles back to safety, carefully, and Abel helps him to his feet.

"Shouldn't Matthew have reached him by now? Will?"

Will nods. "If there were no problems. Yes. Any time now. Give or take. Maybe he is there? Digging a hole?" Hannibal glances back to the edge. He had felt the friability of the soil and rocks under his fingers as he eased his way forwards and then back. He has no particular desire to repeat the experience to check, any time soon. "Of course. Yes. We should have arranged a signal." Will opens his mouth, and then snaps it shut. Another thing he's forgotten. Another obvious thing.

They wait another couple of hours, sorting the gear into piles of things they must take on the morrow, for safety's sake, and the things they can leave behind, buried under a tarp and any remaining firewood, dirt and rocks to weigh it down.

In the late afternoon, Hannibal looks over the edge again.

When he stands, he shakes his head. Nothing has changed.

There is nothing they can do, except wait.

……..

After she gets off the phone with Louise, Alana calls Margot and explains that a search party will be going out the following day. First light.

In turn, Margot puts her phone down and turns to her visitor. “Ms. Lounds, what can I say. I was wrong. There’s been a development. Seems like you were right to be concerned.”

Chapter End Notes

I know, I know, it’s been a while. And I can’t promise the next update will be either this week or the next. But, I always hoped I’d get back round to this, and here we are. A little late, but better that than never.

In other words, in the world beyond fandom, I have an actual book contract and a deadline, and oh boy am I trying to avoid having to write that. Watch me write this instead.

(The name change? Yeah. I had some tabloid press interest in a tweet that went viral, and I was quite keen to avoid them finding me through AO3. They found me through my agent instead. That’s ok, that’s what he’s paid to do.)

End Notes

Thank you to everyone leaving comments and/or kudos! They're very much appreciated!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!